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RURAL TOURISM



Overtourism, a newly coined word, influenced by mass culture means a very high number of people visiting a few tourist destinations, which suffer from the excessive presence of tourists such as Shimla and Goa. Overtourism has consequences like destruction of natural ecosystem, increase in the amount of waste, inflation, migration of residents and so on. The most preferable solution to this problem is a shift towards eco-tourism or rural tourism—a fast growing industry focused on conservation of nature and local livelihood creation. Rural Tourism can provide boost to the tourism industry and help recover the post-pandemic setback. Therefore, the theme of this issue of *Kurukshetra* is Rural Tourism.

India's strength lies in her villages as a large fraction of our population (68 percent) lives in rural areas and rural economy contributes about 45 percent towards the national income and 25-30 percent of India's GDP. Therefore, tourism in rural areas has a high potential to stimulate local economic growth and social change. Rural Tourism is one of the Niche Tourism Products/sectors promoted by the Ministry of Tourism.

According to our lead article *Rural Tourism: India an Incredible Tourism Destination*, tourism acts as a catalyst for the economic growth of a country; it throws a light upon the importance of tourism with a special focus on rural tourism. It states that India's rural areas have a lot to offer to the rest of the world. Rural India, which is rich in arts, crafts, and culture, has the potential to become a tourist hotspot. If the concept of rural tourism is well-marketed, those in the developed world, particularly millennials who are fascinated by traditional ways of life, arts, and crafts will be drawn to visit rural India.

The article *Development of Rural Tourism delves into various schemes and programmes undertaken by the Government of India to promote and develop rural tourism*. It states that rural tourism is an opportunity to promote sustainable and responsible tourism.

Pilgrimages were the first forms of tourism mobility to emerge thousands of years ago. The article *Rural Tourism-Culture and Heritage* provides us a glimpse of rural tourism through the lens of culture and heritage. According to it even today, a lot of tourism-related development in India revolves around pilgrimages, amongst other factors of interest.

India's North-eastern region is a paradise for tourists from all over the world. The seven states are full of beautiful places that attract tourists during any time of the year. The article *North-eastern India- A Tourism Paradise* takes us on a journey of the seven sister states beautifully. It contains the description of prominent tourist places of seven north-eastern states.

The article *Tourism Infrastructure Development* introduces us to the 3 'A' Approach of tourism infrastructure development. It states that there can be no tourism without a destination. For a destination to develop and sustain itself, the 3 'W's are fundamentally important. These three 'A's have to be present in sync for any form of tourism to thrive, including rural tourism. An attempt has been made to co-relate the 'W's with Rural Tourism. An article on *Reviving Tourism post COVID-19 Pandemic* has also been included in this issue.

We hope our readers find information provided through various write-ups on Rural Tourism valuable, interesting and insightful. We wish our readers a happy reading. Stay safe.

Rural Tourism: India as Incredible Tourism Destination

*Amnabh Mishra
Madhubanti Dutta*

India showcases rich heritage and cultural experiences of many incredible places that are worthy enough to represent the nation globally. The sector has been instrumental in providing more employment opportunities and substantially increasing income levels of both the formal and informal sectors of the economy. Professional training should be imparted to the eligible people with the aim of making them fully qualified and competent with the requisite professional skills so that they can take up jobs as heritage tour guides in the tourism industry. A certified guide license will further increase the credibility of a tourist guide in the eyes of the tourists, enhance the overall experience of tourists who visit the country, and generate employment opportunities in the tourism industry.

India is one of the world's oldest civilisations which offers a kaleidoscope of cultural experiences. The country has a rich heritage and numerous attractions. It stretches from the snowcapped Himalayan peaks to the tropical rain forests of the south, covering 32,872,163 square kilometers². It is the world's seventh-largest country, distinguished from the east of Asia by mountains and the sea which gives the country a distinct geographical identity. It is a remarkable tourism destination that provides visitors with diverse experiences. India showcases a variety of heritage resources crafted hundreds of years ago, from huge heritage sites to pristine sea beaches in Andaman & Nicobar and Lakshadweep.

Tourism contributes to substantial economic, social, cultural, educational, and political development. The tourism industry generates both direct and indirect employment. With its rapid growth, new opportunities have increased,

ranging from highly skilled and trained managers in high-end tourist hotels to semi-skilled workers. Tourism has become one of the most important economic sectors in countries like India, producing significant national income and creating high employment opportunities.

It has become the country's fastest-growing service industry with excellent potential for expansion and diversification.

Tourism - A Catalyst to Economic Growth

Under the Swadesh Darshan scheme, the Ministry of Tourism is developing thematic circuits in the country in a planned and prioritised manner. Under the scheme, 15 thematic circuits have been identified for development; namely, North-East Circuit, Buddhist Circuit, Himalayan Circuit, Coastal Circuit, Krishna Circuit, Desert Circuit, Tribal Circuit, Eco Circuit, Wildlife Circuit, Rural Circuit, Spiritual Circuit, Ramayana Circuit, Heritage Circuit, Sufi Circuit, and Tirithankara



(City Palace-Jaipur)

Indian Tourism Statistics, 2019



(The Akshat)

Circuit. The Ministry of Tourism has taken several steps to promote tourism in a sustainable way. It has launched the Swadesh Darshan and PRASHAD schemes to improve its tourism infrastructure. By collaborating with various Central Ministries/ Departments, State Governments, and Urban Local Bodies, 17 iconic sites in the country have been identified for development.

It has also launched the "Adopt a Heritage- Apni Dharohar Apni Pehchan" project, aiming to improve and maintain visitor facilities at heritage sites, monuments, and other tourist attractions. Another significant milestone was the provision of e-Visas for nationals of 170 countries in five subcategories i.e. Tourist visas, e-Business visas, e-Medical visas, e-Medical Attendant visas, and e-Conference visas¹.

NITI Aayog has taken up the holistic development of a few identified islands in the country. The final Site Potential Development Report has been prepared for four islands in Andaman and Nicobar (A&N), namely Smith, Ross, Long, and Aves Islands; and five islands in Lakshadweep, namely Minicoy, Bangaram, Thinnakara, Cheriya, and Suheli Islands. Tourism-based projects have been identified in Long, Aves, Smith, and Neil Islands of A&N and Minicoy, Kadamat, and Suheli Islands of Lakshadweep. Development of Coastal Circuit (Long Island-Neas Smith Island- Neil Island- Havelock Island- Baratang

Island-Port Blair) in Andaman and Nicobar under the Coastal thematic circuit of Swadesh Darshan Scheme is implemented for the development of island tourism in the country².

Given Lakshadweep's enormous ecotourism and fisheries potential, India can become a role model for ecotourism and sustainable fisheries without jeopardising the fragile and sensitive biodiversity of the region. Various initiatives, such as undersea optical fiber connectivity, airport expansion, infrastructure upgrading, and a plan to build water villas on several islands, are examples of commendable efforts.

Large-scale seaweed cultivation attempts to modernise the fisheries sector, and steps to increase production of organic coconut oil and coir are also being pursued³.

National parks form the cornerstone of biodiversity and are important for supporting ecosystems and the flora that live within them. National Parks provide a major boost to the Indian economy, with wildlife and nature-based tourism.

In addition to the economic benefits, tourism has promoted cultural interaction between Indian citizens and people of other countries and fostered regional cooperation. The sector has also played a pivotal role in enhancing India's soft power. The travel and tourism industry is one of the fastest-growing industries globally, with a growth rate of 3.5 percent vis-à-vis a global economic growth rate of 2.5 percent in 2019. The sector contributed around 10.4 percent to global GDP, generated 320 million employees worldwide, and accounted for 27.4 percent of global services exports. However, COVID-19 has had a detrimental impact on the travel industry worldwide, with the sector's contribution to global GDP and employment declining by 49 percent and 19 percent, respectively⁴.

The tourism sector contributes immensely to foreign exchange reserves in the country and provides employment opportunities, both in the

¹Ministry of Tourism, 03 FEB 2020, PIB Delhi
²Ministry of Tourism, 07 JAN 2019, PIB Delhi
³ Vice President's Secretariat, 01 JAN 2021, PIB Delhi
⁴Economic Impact Reports, World Travel & Tourism Council

formal and informal sectors. In 2019, the sector accounted for 11.8 percent of the total employment, 5.8 percent of the total exports, and 6.9 percent of GDP*. However, the sector now contributes only 4.7 percent to GDP, 7.3 percent to total employment, and 2.5 percent to total exports*. The fact that the Services sector contributes 55 percent to the Indian economy, makes the tourism industry even more crucial for the country's overall economic growth.

Despite having a diverse culture and rich architectural heritage, India holds only a 1.2 percent share of the international tourism market (2019) as against Spain (5.7 percent), the USA (3.4 percent), China (4.5 percent), the UK (2.7 percent) and Thailand (2.7 percent)*. Countries like the UK and USA have only 34 and 24 World Heritage sites, respectively, but their foreign exchange earnings from Tourism are much higher than India, which has 40 World Heritage sites.

Against this backdrop, India must adopt innovative approaches to boost and promote different tourism segments such as niche tourism, wellness tourism, adventure tourism, and spiritual tourism. Given that India has been recognised as a destination for spiritual tourism for ages for both domestic and international tourists, we must unleash the potential of spiritual tourism.

Importance of Tourism

In most places of the world, tourism is a significant source of economic growth. Several countries have revolutionised their economies by entirely utilising tourism's potential. Tourism has the potential to generate large-scale productive employment that is multifaceted in nature, ranging from highly skilled to semi-skilled. Tourism has grown and diversified over the decades to become one of the fastest-growing economic sectors. Contemporary tourism is intricately related to economic growth and socio-economic development. Presently, tourism also has a commercial volume that rivals or exceeds oil exports, food items, and automobiles. Tourism has grown to be one of the essential participants in international trade and one of the primary sources of income for many developing countries. This

expansion is accompanied by increased destination diversification and competitiveness. The tourism industry's growing importance as an economic engine and its potential as a development tool is undeniable. It not only drives growth, but also improves people's lives by generating large-scale employment in a variety of fields. It promotes a rich cultural legacy, environmental sustainability, and international peace.

In India, tourism has mostly been constrained to a few traditional cities and towns of historical, architectural, and cultural interest. Due to a lack of infrastructure and communication, many magnificent sites remain unknown or underexplored. Almost every region in India has its own stunning locations that need to be developed and promoted for tourism.

This necessitates a holistic strategy and consistent policy execution across the country. Furthermore, we require planning and financial support from both the States and the Centre in order to develop all of these areas in a systematic manner. There arises the need to focus on rural tourism, which is the future of driving the tourism sector ahead.

A Special Focus on Rural Tourism

With the phenomenal rise of the tourism industry worldwide, the Government of India has implemented several policy initiatives to boost tourism. To make "Incredible India" an attractive tourist destination globally, new tourism goods and packages such as business tourism, health tourism, rural tourism, ecotourism, cultural tourism, pilgrimage tourism, adventure tourism, and sustainable tourism are being developed.

India's rural heartland is an unexplored treasure with its different lifestyles focusing on art and crafts, culture, and natural heritage. Over the past few decades, the country's tourism industry has grown exponentially, but rural tourism has never been given full attention. India's rural areas have a lot to offer to the rest of the world. Rural India, which is rich in arts, crafts, and culture, has the potential to become a tourist hotspot. If the concept of rural tourism is well-marketed, those in

*WTC India Report 2021

*WTC India Report 2022

*India Tourism Statistics at a Glance 2021

the developed world, particularly millennials who are fascinated by traditional ways of life, arts, and crafts will be drawn to visit rural India.

The Ministry of Tourism has designated rural tourism as one of the Niche Tourism sectors for growth in the country. The Ministry has developed a Draft National Strategy and Roadmap for Rural Tourism, which focuses on developing and promoting local products through tourism. As a result, this leads to the generation of income and employment in rural areas and empowers local communities, youth, and women to realise Aatma Nirbhar Bharat's vision.

Recognising the potential of rural tourism in the country, the Ministry of Tourism has designated the Rural Circuit as one of the fifteen thematic circuits for development under the Swadesh Darshan Scheme. The intention was to use tourism as a force multiplier to revitalise the rural economy and provide domestic and international tourists a glimpse of the country's rural aspects.

The details of the projects sanctioned by the Ministry of Tourism under the Rural Circuit theme of the Swadesh Darshan in the country are Development of Gandhi Circuit, Bhitharwa Chandrakia- Turkaulia (Bihar) and development of Malanad Malabar Cruise Tourism Project (Kerala)*.

The National Strategy and Roadmap for Development of Rural Tourism in India - An initiative towards Aatma Nirbhar Bharat - focuses on the following key pillars:

- Model policies and best practices for rural tourism)

- Digital technologies and platforms for rural tourism)
- Developing clusters for rural tourism)
- Marketing support for rural tourism)
- Capacity building of stakeholders)
- Governance and institutional framework)

The Ministry has now revamped the Swadesh Darshan scheme with a destination and tourist-centric approach to develop responsible and sustainable destinations.

The government needs to focus on handholding with states based on a few significant parameters in rural India for tourism development:

- Air/Rail/Road Connectivity-For last-mile connectivity)
- Infrastructure development-modern buses and stations at reliable frequency, taxi/ shared mobility – App-based integration of guides, parking/charging/refueling, sign Boards and information Kiosks)
- Identifying and linking heritage spots in the given destinations)
- Facilities like signage in English and other foreign languages)
- Tax issues-One India, one tax system for tourist vehicles, protects the tourists from facing multiple taxations)
- Promotion of homestays and high ended branded hotel rooms in resorts to fulfill the interest of staycations and workcations)



(Agri Fort)

*Lok Sabha Unstarred question no. 4005 answered on 24.03.2021 funds allocated for promotion of rural tourism 4005 (Dr. B. S. Patil, Ministry of Tourism, Government of India)

- Connectivity to promote local tourism products, arts, and crafts to a national and global audience
- Focus on digital media (social media platforms, social messaging) for promotional activities

With a special focus on rural tourism in India, a few highlights need to be significantly noted:

- Creation of jobs, retention of jobs, and new business opportunities
- Focus on heritage and monuments
- Culture and festivals
- Nature and ecotourism
- Promoting agri-tourism
- Promoting leisure tourism
- Promoting marine tourism
- Promoting adventure-tourism
- Wellness and ayurveda
- Tribal food and cuisines
- Birdwatching and wildlife
- Religion and mythology
- Sustainable exploitation of untapped rural culture and heritage offerings
- Rural tourism can lead the way for sustainable and responsible tourism

The National Plan and Roadmap for Rural Tourism Development strive to prioritise rural tourism at the national level. It also intends to bring together diverse programs for tackling issues like poverty, women empowerment, and improving the economic position of rural people. The plan is built around the overarching subject of sustainable and responsible tourism, which is backed by the strategic pillars that are benchmarking state policies and best practices, digital technologies, and platforms for rural tourism, developing clusters for rural tourism, marketing support for rural tourism, capacity building of stakeholders, governance, and institutional framework.

Consumers have global access to digital technologies and platforms, which allows service providers to enhance the tourist sector's development and competitive standards.

Digital technologies and platforms provide

new opportunities for rural entrepreneurs to improve their market access and financial inclusion. Efforts should be taken to improve the understanding of how to leverage digital tools to grow rural tourism. By harnessing the power of the internet, cloud computing, social media, and other digital technologies, rural businesses can overcome geographic obstacles and a lack of alternative marketing channels.

Villages house the country's culture, customs, crafts, legacy, and agricultural traditions. Developing and promoting these indigenous products through tourism can produce revenue and employment in rural regions and empower local communities, youth, and women, allowing Aatma Nirbhar Bharat to realise its mission. It will help reduce the migration from rural areas, prevent poverty and promote sustainable development.

Way Forward

Along with its compatibility with other economic activities, contribution to GDP, job creation, rural tourism has a significant potential to drive local economic development and social change. The government should acknowledge the importance of rural tourism in India and provide stakeholders with a sustainable environment. Professional training should be imparted to the eligible people with the aim of making them duly qualified and competent with the requisite professional skills and help them to take up jobs as heritage tour guides in the tourism industry. A certified guide license will further increase the credibility of a tourist guide in the eyes of the tourists, enhance the overall experience of tourists who visit the country, and generate employment opportunities in the tourism industry.

Furthermore, the government should provide appropriate funding and cost-effective infrastructure to encourage the growth of rural tourism. Tourism in rural regions can only be maintained if a comprehensive, inclusive planning strategy based on a multi-action, multi-stakeholder participatory approach is adopted and implemented.

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Development of Rural Tourism

Gaajl Kamala Vardhania-Rao

India's rich cultural, historical, religious and natural heritage provides a huge potential for the development of tourism and job creation in the country. The need is to develop tourist circuits on specific themes to attract tourists and create employment and livelihood opportunities for local communities. This can be achieved through the development of thematic circuits and destinations which are unique to the region in terms of theme and cultural backdrop. Such thematic tourist circuits and destinations need to be developed in a manner that supports communities, provides employment, and fosters social integration responsibly and sustainably.

India is a kaleidoscope of ancient heritage, culture, diverse landscapes, and a great variety of biodiversity. India is enveloped with the mighty Himalayas in the North, the Indian Ocean in the South, the coastline of the Arabian Sea, and the Bay of Bengal on the western and eastern shores. Privileged with extraordinary climatic conditions and a plethora of cultures surviving and evolving over millennia, the land of India has a wide spectrum of communities celebrating unity in diversity. India is endowed with diverse tourist attractions and each State/ Union Territory has its distinct features.

The unique geography of India combined with its connectivity and adequate infrastructure offers a huge assortment of destinations, experiences, and activities for tourists from all walks of life. Tourist destination experiences range from the shopping experience in its bustling bazaars to serene natural retreats around protected areas, from exhilarating adventure sports to equanimous yoga wellness centers, from modern metropolitans to rural and tribal stories. It is an odyssey of joy and discovery travelling through the country.

The natural beauty of the Indian subcontinent



(Performance by Rajasthani Dance)

is unparalleled with beautiful snowy peaks, dense forests, pristine beaches, crystal clear lakes, golden deserts and vast green valleys. The landscapes are further enhanced by the contrast evident across the regions from the cold deserts of Leh to the sub-divided desert dunes in Rajasthan. Starting from the snow-capped Himalayas in the north, traversing the deserts of Rajasthan, crossing the lush forests of Madhya Pradesh and then sailing into the expansive backwaters of Kerala, and finally diving into the pristine waters of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the journey is full of adventurous highlands and serene plains and lowlands. A land boasting a diverse variety of flora and fauna, India is also home to many national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, tiger reserves and biosphere reserves, which offer enchanting wildlife sightings.

Ministry of Tourism promotes India as a holistic 360 degree destination on different experiential themes like rural, wellness, and culinary amongst others. Rural Tourism is one of the Niche Tourism Products promoted by the Ministry of Tourism. The promotions are undertaken through Ministry's official website www.incredibleindia.org and various social media platforms to have a conversation with travellers and build a bond beyond pure marketing of the destination in both domestic and overseas markets. Information on different destinations in India including rural tourism destinations is shared through the official website. Promotions are also undertaken through two social media handles of the Ministry on different themes.

Form of tourism that showcases the rural life, art, culture, and heritage at rural locations, thereby benefiting the local community economically and socially as well as enable interaction between the tourists and the locals for a more enriching tourism experience can be termed as rural tourism.

Rural Tourism focuses on the visitor actively participating in a rural lifestyle. The tourist travels to a rural location and experiences life while taking part in the daily activities of the village. The tourist also gets a chance to imbibe the traditions

Rural Tourism is an opportunity to promote sustainable and responsible tourism. Considering that the majority of the country's population still resides in rural areas, the potential to create mutually enriching experiences benefitting local communities as well as tourists is substantial.

and culture of the area. Rural tourism may also include an overnight stay in which the visitor also gets to know the unique lifestyle of the village at much closer quarters.

Rural tourism is multi-faceted and entails agricultural tourism, cultural tourism, nature tourism, adventure and ecotourism, which are all closely aligned. Each of the 600,000+

villages has its unique story, heritage, and culture to share with the tourist.

The Ministry of Tourism supports the development of tourism infrastructure by its various schemes and initiatives, which currently include the Swadesh Darshan Scheme and the PRASHAD Scheme.

India's rich cultural, historical, religious and natural heritage provides a huge potential for the development of tourism and job creation in the country. There is a great scope and need to develop tourist circuits on specific themes to attract tourists and create employment and livelihood opportunities for local communities. This can be achieved through the development of thematic circuits and destinations which are unique to the region in terms of theme and cultural backdrop. Such thematic tourist circuits and destinations need to be developed in a manner that supports communities, provides employment, and fosters social integration responsibly and sustainably.

In due recognition of this the Ministry of Tourism (MoT) had launched the Swadesh Darshan Scheme (Central Sector Scheme)- for the integrated development of theme-based tourist circuits in the country in 2014-15. This scheme is envisioned to synergise with other Government of India schemes like Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Skill India, Make in India, etc. with the idea of positioning the tourism sector as a major engine for job creation, the driving force for economic growth, building synergy with various sectors to enable tourism to realise its potential.

Recognising the potential of Rural Tourism in the country, Rural Circuit has been recognised as one of the 13 thematic circuits to offer an exclusive



(Boat ride in Ganges River, Agra/Uttar Pradesh)

experience to tourists and alongside develop lesser-known destinations located in remote parts of the country.

Among the 15 themes identified under the Swadesh Darshan scheme, 75 projects have been completed / in-progress across the various States / UTs of India which include 02 rural circuits, 10 North-East circuits, 07 Himalayan circuits, 10 coastal circuits, 01 desert circuit, 04 tribal circuits, 06 eco-circuits, 02 wildlife circuits, and 10 heritage circuits, sanctioned for a total of Rs 3,994.92 crore.

The development of Shriharwa, Chandraba and Tarkaula in Bihar and the Malanad Malabar Cruise Tourism Project in Kerala has been undertaken under the Rural Circuit theme. This shall help in generating employment through active involvement of local communities and following community-based development and a pro-poor tourism approach.

The Government of India launched the Pilgrimage Rejuvenation And Spiritual Augmentation Drive (PRASAD) scheme in the year 2014-2015 under the Ministry of Tourism. This scheme focuses on developing and identifying pilgrimage sites across India for enriching the religious tourism experience. It aims to integrate pilgrimage destinations in a prioritised, planned and sustainable manner to provide a complete religious tourism experience. The growth of domestic tourism hugely depends on pilgrimage

tourism.

Pilgrimage and rural tourism are inter-linked owing to the presence of major pilgrimage centres in close vicinity to rural areas leading to employment generation and development of peripheral infrastructure, thus, benefitting both tourists and locals alike.

Development of tourism, including tourism in rural areas and the setting up of Rural Tourism Parks, is the primary responsibility of the State Governments/UT Administrations. However, the Ministry of Tourism has formulated a Strategy and Roadmap for Rural Tourism which, inter alia, focuses on developing and promoting local products through tourism subsequently, resulting in the generation of income and jobs in rural areas and empowering local communities, youth, and women, fulfilling the vision of Aatma Nirbhar Bharat.

Recognising the immense potential of rural tourism in India and prioritising rural tourism at the national level, the Ministry of Tourism has formulated a National Strategy and Roadmap for Development of Rural Tourism in the Country.

National Strategy of Rural Tourism aims at creating income and job opportunities in rural areas and empowering local communities fulfilling the vision of the Hoo/bis Prime Minister for Aatma Nirbhar Bharat. The Strategy aims at the convergence of various schemes addressing issues

tourism mobility to emerge thousands of years ago. Even today, a lot of tourism-related development in India revolves around pilgrimages, amongst other factors of interest. Sans, economic and cultural factors joined hands with religious factors to convert pilgrimage tourism into a prototype of what we see today as tourism. Thus, temples became breeding grounds for art and culture. Many of the music and dance forms of today have evolved from temple traditions. It is interesting that, despite the busy urban lives of today, there is a trend where people visit their roots to attend cultural festivities in rural areas. This stems from nostalgia. But the percentage is not very large or significant. Studies show that the decreasing attendance emanates from the lack of interest of the succeeding generations because of multiple factors, including altered cultural identities and a lack of tourism-ready developments in the rural areas. Culture not only helps people go back to their roots but also attracts the world beyond to come looking for it in the place of its origin.

Rural Tourism in India: A Reality Check

Rural India has so much to offer to the rest of the world. It is rich in arts, crafts, religion, rituals, and culture and has tremendous potential to become a tourist hotspot. Rural tourism stimulates the rural economy, creates job opportunities, and promotes infrastructure development in related areas. Furthermore, it has the potential to revitalise local arts and crafts while preventing viable traditional occupations from being displaced. From the perspective of the culture and heritage of India, this is very critical. The National Tourism Policy of India recognised that rural tourism (where significant amounts of our cultural and natural wealth exist) should be given special attention. Rural tourism is also on the rise as a result of the 'experiential tourism' culture among tourists. Rural tourism may be both populist and alternative in nature. Although rural tourism has enormous potential in India, it has been hampered by a number of issues including a lack of perception, a lack of opportunities to draw investments, obsolete management practices, and poor infrastructure, including connectivity and communication. A set of preconceived notions, backed by fear of intrusion into socially constructed barriers that once protected rural

lives from cultural erosion, and the clash between the "host culture" and the "visitor culture" add fuel to the flame. The fear that development would cause rural gentrification also gives second thoughts to people in rural areas which cause a diluted willingness to cooperate and open their spaces and communities to the world beyond theirs. But rural tourism development adds to the societal benefits. These benefits are more than one. It leads to the upkeep and support of public transportation. This causes increased social interaction. Increased social interaction creates chances for cultural exchanges, increased awareness, and revitalisation of local customs, crafts and cultural identities. It can also help to dissuade the youth of rural towns from migrating to metropolitan areas since they are exposed to a variety of other sources of income through tourism. Tourist amenities may benefit people in terms of improved infrastructure, health, and cleanliness of public places. As a result, the rural community's standard of living rises, creating an ideal 'Burban' community.

The concept of rural tourism is hardly a new thought. Most of what we see today under the umbrella of "rural tourism" has been something that already existed under different other headings. The only thing that has changed is that we now have a name for it. Rural tourism as a concept was launched in 2002. In the tenth five-year plan (2002-07), UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) launched a pilot initiative to develop rural tourism in India through the Planning Commission. Rural tourism was one of the key concerns throughout the 11th five-year plan (2007-12) with 65 rural tourist projects sanctioned during this time period. According to the report of the working group on tourism (2011), the 12th five-year plan envisioned the development of 70 rural tourist clusters across the country with an annual budget of Rs 770 crore. But like mentioned earlier on, rural tourism existed in many forms for a very long time before it was formalised as a concept. Let us now analyse how rural tourism has evolved in India over the years.

Cultural Interpretation of National Tourism Policy through the Years

The Government of India announced its first



(Houses built in Kerala)

such as poverty, empowerment of women, and strengthening the economic status of the rural people.

The Strategy suggests identifying clusters of villages having high potential for tourism development in different parts of the country. The themes for rural tourism can include local crafts and cuisines, folk music, shows, dramas, agri-tourism, organic farming, yoga and meditation centres, lakes, wetlands and eco-zones, rural sports, cultural events, national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, and unique tribal culture proximity to existing tourism circuits.

The National Strategy and Roadmap for Development of Rural Tourism is based on an overarching theme of sustainable and responsible tourism, which will be supported by six strategic pillars namely model policies and best practices for rural tourism, digital technologies for rural tourism, development of rural tourism clusters, marketing support for rural tourism, capacity building, Governance, and institutional support.

The Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) launched Shyama Prasad Mukherji Rurban Mission on 21 February 2016 in an attempt to make the selected rural areas in form of the cluster, socially, economically, and physically sustainable regions by providing economic, social, and infrastructure amenities, thus leading to sustainable and balanced regional development in the country. Three Hundred Rurban Clusters with thematic economic growth points were proposed to be developed across the country under this innovative Mission. To ensure an optimum level of development,

twenty-one components have been suggested as desirable for the Cluster development. Tourism Promotion is one of the twenty-one components.

This year, the National Tourism Day (NTD), on 25 January 2022 was celebrated on the theme of Rural and Community Centric Tourism. This was done given the recent recognition of Pochampally Village from Telangana by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) as the Best Tourism Village. The Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO Initiative was launched to advance the role of tourism in safeguarding rural villages, along with their landscapes, natural and cultural diversity, and their local values and activities, including local gastronomy. India had nominated a few other villages as well for the UNWTO entries as the Best Tourism Villages 2021 including Kongthong in Meghalaya, Chitrakoot in Chhattisgarh, and Kevdi in Gujarat, Khonoma in Nagaland, and Kumarakom in Kerala. Given the significance of Rural Tourism as a unique tourism product, Ministry had developed promotional creatives highlighting India's entries to UNWTO best tourism villages.

Rural Tourism is an opportunity to promote sustainable and responsible tourism. Considering that the majority of the country's population still resides in rural areas, the potential to create mutually enriching experiences benefitting local communities as well as tourists is substantial.

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Rural Tourism-Culture and Heritage

Hemant Mehta

The culture of India qualifies as a diverse demographic heritage in ways of living and human values. The culture of today's India is a product of years of cultural metamorphosis and the melting of cultures. Rural tourism can give a tremendous fillip to economic, political, and cultural benefits as a large part of India is rural. Most of what we see today under the umbrella of "rural tourism" has been something that already existed under various other headings. The sustained development of rural tourism holds the key to India's occupancy of a prime spot in the list of countries with a treasure trove of rich and diverse cultural heritages. If this industry of rural tourism grows rapidly, it will not only boost India's economy but also what the appetites of tourists to experience the magic of India's rural grandeur.

India has always been proud of its rich and varied culture. As a soft power, India has always used culture to call for the betterment of humanity. The culture of India qualifies as a diverse demographic heritage in ways of living and human values. It is an unquestioned truth that 68.84 percent of India's population is located in rural areas. According to Census 2011 data, approximately 450 million of India's total population migrated within the country. Around 78 million or 15.8 percent of all fairly domestic migrants resettled from rural to urban areas. This may not look that serious at first glance. But remember that India is the second-most populous country in the world, which is actually quite significant. The number of internally migrated people in India alone is quite more than the total population of the USA, the third-most populous country in the world. India is a conglomeration of cultures, and we are proud of the diversity we have. Cultural confluences occur as a result of migrations, which accommodate, assimilate, and acculturate, resulting in the formation of new cultural identities that lead to the emergence of a diaspora. The evolution of culture is integral to the onward progress of humanity. And, the culture of today's India is a product of years of cultural metamorphosis and the melting of cultures. While

documenting our various histories, we do arrive at a conclusive clarity about our heritage that needs to be preserved at all costs. There are several ways and means to achieve this, the foremost being by tracing the path back to the origins of our culture. It is in this context, rural tourism can give a tremendous fillip to economic, political, and cultural benefits as a larger part of India is rural. Hence, there is a clamouring need to analyse the concept of "rural tourism" through the lens of culture and heritage.

India is one of the oldest civilisations in the world. Since its inception, humanity has undergone multiple evolutions. Religion has been a very vital social construct that has evolved all along and has been critical in shaping the course of humanity. Pilgrimages were the first forms of



Artists performing *Saxaci* from *Satimponi*
(Image: SMC MACAT)

tourism policy in November 1982. The first tourism policy's mission was to promote sustainable tourism as a means of economic growth and social integration, as well as to give an impression of India overseas as a country with a rich heritage, a dynamic present, and a promising future. This coincided with the sixth five-year plan that was launched in the year 1980. The sixth five-year plan placed a strong emphasis on ensuring investments in the hospitality sector. While taking initiatives to strengthen tourism in the country, it was vital to guarantee that the development would indeed be sustainable and that there would be no detrimental effects on the environment or, for that matter, on the traditional values of the land in question. As a first step towards sensitisation, subjects on traditional art and culture were given emphasis in the education sector, encouraging thoughts to sustain and take them forward in

the years that followed, paving the foundation for "Edu-tourism". Prior to this, in 1963, the Ad hoc committee on tourism in its elaborate report acknowledged the need to understand and foreground the folklore of the land and the names of many sites of prominence like Tanjore, the area around the River Periyar, Banaras, Mandu, etc., along with the then cities like Delhi, Bombay, Hyderabad, Mysore, and Madras. Almost 10 years after the first tourism policy was released in 1982, a National Action Plan for Tourism was launched in 1992. The action plan pledged that tourism would be developed in a manner that preserves the cultural expression and heritage of India in all its manifestations, including support for arts and culture. Preservation and enrichment of the environment formed an integral part of tourism development under the action plan. A proposal was made to convert a large number of *Havelis*



(that were otherwise in a state of disrepair) into hotels that would render assistance in the preservation of the national heritage, and this was done by retaining their original identity on a hundred percent basis. Following the success of the Surajkund-Crafts Fair, Faridabad and Shilpgram, Udaipur, it was further recommended to identify similar sites where traditional art and crafts in the region could be preserved and promoted. Traditional fairs like Pushkar Meela, Sonapur Cattle Meela, and Alleppey Boat Race were given liberal financial assistance for further development. Though not in an explicit manner, these were perfect examples of how they were merged under rural tourism.

As discussed earlier, rural tourism as a concept was initiated through the National Tourism Policy in India in 2002. The National Tourism Policy of 2002 coincided with the commencement of the 10th five-year plan. Under the policy, seven key areas (7S) were identified: *Swagat* (welcome), *Suchana* (information), *Sauvidha* (facilitation), *Suraksha* (safety), *Sahayog* (cooperation), *Samvachana* (infrastructure development), and *Safai* (cleanliness). It called for the expansion of cultural tourism and the active promotion of rural tourism. The policy identified Uttarakhand (then Uttaranchal), Rajasthan, Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, Chattisgarh, the North Eastern States, and the plantation regions as optimum locations for the promotion of endemic tourism. A national register of key cultural sites was to be maintained. The phrase "Incredible India" was adopted under this policy to create an international brand position for India. The Ministry of Tourism launched an initiative in 2008 to teach the local populace about appropriate behaviour and etiquette when dealing with foreign visitors. The campaign was dubbed *Aathi Devo Bhava*, taken from Shikshavale of the Taittiriya Upanishad, which translates to "Guests are like God" in English. The objectives of this campaign are twofold: the first is to ensure that the rural citizenry are all well informed and educated of the need to preserve India's priceless heritage and culture, and maintain cleanliness at home while extending hospitality and a warm welcome to visitors and tourists. The second and more crucial objective of the *Aathi Devo Bhava* campaign is to stall negative and unfriendly practices in existence, like the display

of resentment towards tourists and the uncontrolled and endless looting of visitors (especially those from abroad). Such practices only become counter-productive to the readiness, enthusiasm and willingness to receive tourists and treat them with warmth and with friendship.

In 2015, coinciding with the timeline of the Draft National Tourism Policy 2015, the Swadesh Darshan Scheme was launched. Under the scheme, fifteen thematic circuits were identified: Buddhist Circuit, Coastal Circuit, Desert Circuit, Eco Circuit, Heritage Circuit, Himalayan Circuit, Krishna Circuit, North East Circuit, Ramayana Circuit, Rural Circuit, Spiritual Circuit, Sufi Circuit, Tirthankar Circuit, Tribal Circuit, Wildlife Circuit. In 2017, the Ministry of Culture launched the National Mission on Cultural Mapping. Under this scheme, the cultural mapping of India is done via a running nationwide cultural awareness program called *Hamari Sanskriti Hamari Pehchan Aahyan* for the development of all art forms and artists. This is a useful exercise, as it will enable policymakers to make quick yet informed policy decisions in the future. In 2020, the Government of India launched *Dekho Apna Desh*, a scheme that encourages Indians to travel across the length and breadth of India. To encourage this scheme, a *Parichay Parv* was launched with the added intent of spreading the message of "Tourism for All". About a year ago, in June, the Ministry of Tourism released a Draft National Strategy and Roadmap for the Development of Rural Tourism in India. The draft identifies rural tourism as a means of fulfilling the vision of *Aatma Nirbhar Bharat*. It aims to prioritise rural tourism at a national level. The strategy is based upon six strategic pillars, which include benchmarking state policies and best practices and building a government and institutional framework. The draft acknowledges the local community as a key stakeholder and aims at involving them with the help of other stakeholders, including NGOs, which can play a critical role in forging community linkages. There is a need of clusters for rural tourism. This helps facilitate groups of villages holding activities together. These clusters are called "Rurban clusters."

Education: A Catalyst for the Promotion of Rural Tourism

In November 2021, the Draft National Tourism



(Ganesh Visarjan, Mumbai)

Policy 2021 was made available to the public. The policy has joined hands with about 20 ministries and departments to identify areas of cooperation and collaboration. As far as culture and heritage are concerned, the Ministry of Tourism is planning to effectively coordinate with the Ministry of Rural Development, the Ministry of Culture, and the Department of School Education and Department of Higher Education to identify areas of concern for the effective promotion of culture and heritage through rural tourism. It is noteworthy that the National Education Policy 2020 takes a formidable step in the promotion of experiential education and vocational internships. This will encourage students, who are the future of tomorrow, to sensitise them and the people around them about the pressing need to promote and preserve our cultural heritage. This will also lead to Edu-Tourism and join Rural Tourism as a tributary. It mentions "Unique Village Life Experience" packages that will help revive traditional activities in rural India. According to the draft National Tourism Policy 2021, creating experiences around our heritage sites and monuments with interpretation facilities, souvenir shops, restaurants, and other amenities will enhance the entire experience

of any tourist. A strong public-private-people partnership to restore and transform our historical and cultural heritage into tourism products will help preserve not only our tangible legacy but also our intangible resources. In this context, the contribution by non-governmental organisations including SPIC MACAY (Society for the Promotion of Indian Classical Music and Culture Amongst Youth) to the promotion and preservation of the tangible and intangible culture and heritage of India and its folk arts, dance forms, theatre, crafts, heritage sites, and so on has been very pertinent. The sustained development of rural tourism holds the key to India's occupancy of a prime spot in the list of countries with a treasure trove of rich and diverse cultural heritage. If this industry of rural tourism grows rapidly, it will not only boost India's economy; it will also whet the appetites of tourists to experience the magic of India's rural grandeur. Let us all, as confidants of our vibrant culture, pledge to support and actively take part in all endeavours to bring rural tourism to the forefront while the world around us celebrates our heritage.

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North-eastern India- A Tourism Paradise

Dr. Jagat Baruah Kashyap

This article provides brief introduction to some popular tourist destinations of some north-eastern states. It is particularly noteworthy that these popular tourist destinations are primarily located in rural settings, thus offering the visitors a wonderful experience of rural India.

India's North-eastern region is a paradise for tourists from all over the world. The seven sister states are full of beautiful places that attract tourists during any time of the year. It is particularly noteworthy that several popular tourist destinations of the region are primarily located in rural settings, thus offering the visitor a different kind of experience of rural India. These destinations also provide great relief to large number of tourists looking for a break from the humdrum of the cities. The following are brief introductions to some of the popular rural tourist destinations of the Northeast:

Assam: Sualkuchi, Hajo, Mayong, Jatinga

In less than one hour's drive outside Guwahati are three popular rural destinations – Sualkuchi, Hajo and Mayong. Of them Sualkuchi and Hajo are in fact a twin destination just about 20 km west of Guwahati, each offering a different ambience altogether for the visitors to carry home. Hajo is a village of five religious shrines, four are Hindu

temples, one a Jain shrine. One of the Hindu temples is also an important place for Buddhist pilgrims. The Hayagriva-Madhava temple atop the Manikul hill is a Vishnu shrine built in the 10th century, with the Kalika Purana providing a great glorification of it. The present structure was built during the reign of Koch king Bhagudev Narayana of Kamarupa in 1583 A.D. after the older temple was destroyed by Kalapahar, a Muslim invader from Bengal in 1564 AD. The relief works in the architectural ruins of Hayagriva-Madhava temple has a number of dancing female figures. These suggest that the Devadasi dance form had once thrived in the Hajo temples. Originally believed to be of Tibet, the Devodasi tradition had travelled to other temples of India from Assam after Vajishtha muni had brought it to the temples of Kamarupa. The other Hindu temples in Hajo are the Kodar and Kamulewar temples atop the Madanachal hill, and the Kameswar temple atop the Gokarna Hill, the deity in all three being Shiva. There are also a few smaller shrines around – including the





(Tourism in Assam)

Ganeswar temple on the way to Kedar, and the Apunarbhava Kund.

Hajo also happens to be a centre of attraction for Buddhists. A section of the Lamas of Bhutan and Tibet believe that Lord Buddha had attained *maha-parinirvana* at Hajo. But the stronger likelihood is of Padma-Sambhava, great founder of Lamaism, breathing his last atop the Manikut hill. Buddhist pilgrims who visit Hajo in January-February, consider the deity inside Hayagriva-Madhava temple as *Mohomuri*.

On the Garudachal hill, not far away from the Hayagriva-Madhava temple is Poo-Mecca, a Muslim shrine established by a group of Auliya (saints) led by Ghiasuddin Auliya in the 16th century. While Ghiasuddin died here and the shrine was developed around his *dargah*, it is believed that Ghiasuddin had brought with him a *poa* (one-fourth of a spoor in weight) of earth from Mecca to set up the shrine, from which the *raita* Poo-Mecca was derived. Poo-Mecca, however, is revered by both Muslims and Hindus.

Hardly eleven km from Hajo is Sualkuchi, a village where several thousand men and women work round the clock on their looms to produce amazing fabrics in *muga* – the exclusive golden silk-yarn available only in Assam, and *poof* silk. Visitors buying some of the best Assam silk fabrics directly from the producers at Sualkuchi can also see the weavers work magic on their looms. While sericulture is said to have flourished here as early as in the 4th century BC in the place then known as Swarnakuchi (Golden Zone), it was around 1650 AD that Momai Tamuli Barbarua, an influential officer of the Ahom kingdom, had developed Sualkuchi into a vibrant silk industry village. Often referred to as the Manchester of the East, it was during a visit to this silk village on the bank of the

Brahmaputra in 1946 that Mahatma Gandhi had remarked that "Assamese women weave dreams on their looms."

Also close to Guwahati, some 35 km to the east is Mayong – a village where people, till about a century ago, mostly used to practise magic and occult. Though such wizardry was earlier used for curing various ailments, scaring off ghosts, curing persons possessed by evil spirits and overcoming misfortune, there are still a few dozen wizards in Mayong today who continue to practise the magic art for various purposes. During a day-long trip to Mayong, visitors can not only watch a couple of such magic presentations, but also visit four temples around the place – Kechaikhoiti temple at Burha Mayong, Ganesh temple at Hatimuria, Narasimha temple at Hiloikhrunda, and Shiva temple at Kachashita. An hour-long visit to the Mayong Village Museum and Research Centre on the other hand provides a glimpse to the past of the area.

For those interested in nature, Jatinga is a village near Hailong, which is about 300 km from Guwahati. Inhabited by the matrilineal Jaintia tribe, Jatinga is famous for several things, the most important being the bird suicide mystery. Every year a large number of birds are found dead at this place during the foggy and cloudy weather at the end of the monsoon months. While scientists are yet to unravel the mystery, legendary birdman Dr Salim Ali had once wondered why so many species of diurnal resident birds should be on the move at a time when they should be fast asleep. Hundreds of visitors flock to the village between September to November every year to witness the mysterious phenomenon during the dark moonless nights. With a literacy rate of 83.91 percent, Jatinga has a number of home-stay facilities; one can also visit a number of other colourful tribal villages around Hailong, Assam's only hill station.

Meghalaya: Mawlynnong

About 72 km away from Shillong, the Meghalaya capital, is situated Mawlynnong – a beautiful village inhabited by the Khasi tribe, which has earned global fame as being one of the cleanest villages of the world. Locally referred to as “God’s Own Garden”, it is also one of the finest examples of community-based eco-tourism initiative in India. While every villager considers it his or her sacred duty to promote cleanliness, Mawlynnong’s dairy lanes are dotted with bamboo garbage bins for people to dump waste. The village has pits where the waste is turned into manure, and visitors can also buy pockets of organic manure from there. Plastic, polythene and smoking are strictly prohibited here. Every Mawlynnong household also practices rainwater harvesting. Visitors can also have a bird’s eye view of Bangladesh from the village perched on the southern edge of the Shillong plateau. The single-decker Hohwet Living Root Bridge is yet another unique attraction of Mawlynnong.

Arunachal Pradesh: Ziro Valley

About 110 km from Itanagar is Ziro—a popular destination for those looking at spending a few days in a perfect rural setting in Arunachal Pradesh. While Ziro is a small district town, the Ziro Valley itself is a wonderful rural setting perched in the Eastern Himalayas, and offering an entirely different experience to the visitors.

Situated on the banks of the Pange river, Ziro is a musical valley comprising of several ancient villages like Hong, Hari, Hija, Bula, Baro, and Siro. A visit to any of these villages, and more particularly to Hong and Hari – the two larger villages – one gets a feeling of travelling through a living anthropological museum, with older women wearing facial tattoos and large nose-rings.

Being home to several colourful Himalayan bird species nesting amid tall pine trees and wild flowering shrubs, Ziro Valley is also a bird-watchers’ paradise. Moreover, visitors are also amazed with how inhabitants of Apatani village rear fish in their paddy fields, a rare farming practice in the world. While Dolo Mando is a popular hiking destination nearby, one can also trek to the Kile Fakho ridge

to have a panoramic view of the Ziro Valley on one side and the lofty Himalayas on the other. There are also two ancient temples nearby – the Meghna Cave temple and Sidheshwar Nath Shivainga. Most tourists carry home colourful fabrics woven by the Apatani women, as also beautiful cane and bamboo baskets made by the men.

Ziro also figures in India’s Tentative List for UNESCO’s World Heritage Site, seeking global recognition for the distinct Apatani civilization with systematic land use practices and rich traditional ecological knowledge of natural resources management and conservation, acquired over the centuries through informal experimentation. Intricate handloom designs, traditional cane and bamboo crafts, and vibrant traditional village councils called Bulyaŋ have made Ziro Valley an interesting example of a living cultural landscape where man and environment have harmoniously co-existed through changing times.

The best time to visit Ziro is in January when the Apatanis observe the Murung rituals, or in July when they celebrate the Oree Festival. The younger generation has, eight years ago started the Ziro Music Festival, a four-day extravaganza which attracts music lovers from all over the country.

Manipur: Andro

About 25 km outside Imphal, is Andro—a beautiful village tucked away in the forest foothills of the Nongmaiching hills, which has several reasons to attract tourists interested in seeing rural Manipur. Local lore says that Andro is home to Manipur’s first settlers, and that the name is derived from ‘andro’ – meaning “village of the people who came back.” The villagers who belong to the Loi community, had apparently returned here after they had tried to shift to another place, but were driven back. The local residents are excellent potters and their pottery products have attracted worldwide attention. Andro also has a cultural complex and museum which has artefacts collected from various tribal communities of Manipur as well as other states of the North-east. These include fabrics, musical instruments, pottery, jewellery, wood carving, basketries, bull metals, rare coins, rare manuscripts, paintings, dolls, etc.



(Tourism in Imphal)

Visitors also offer prayers to Panam Ningthou, the village deity at Mei Mutaba, an ancient temple which has a sacred fire that is believed to have been burning since time immemorial. Households maintain the fire by turn with two households looking after it every day.

Nagaland: Khonoma

One of Nagaland's most historic villages, Khonoma is hardly 20 km from Kohima, the state capital, inhabited by people of the Angami tribe, one of the 18 tribes of the hill state. Khonoma, a 400-year-old village, was the scene of a series of fierce resistances against the British. Memories of two major battles in 1850 and 1879 respectively – in which scores of brave Angami men had laid down their lives to protect their land – continue to remain popular, having been passed down through 'word of mouth' from one generation to another.

Local residents guide tourists through stone pathways that wind around the village, showing spots where their ancestors fought bloody battles with the British. They take particular pride in showing the traditional forts called *Khuda* – meaning "place of defense" – built of stones which are preserved with care. The typical Khonoma forts had provision for rolling down rocks and boulders through openings in the walls to resist the enemy.

Another interesting feature of Khonoma is the *khery* – traditional gates leading the localities inhabited by the different *Ahel* (class). The gates have wonderful artwork, mostly in rocks and wood, which also represent the various taboos and beliefs of the respective *Ahel*.

Khonoma has very good home-stay facilities, with host families offering exotic Naga cuisine. Different varieties of natural fruits, vegetables and herbs, as also insects, find way into the Khonoma cuisine, while the local residents weave

colourful traditional shawls, produce exquisitely woven cane and bamboo basketry and ethnic ornaments.

Often described as Asia's first green village, the people of Khonoma had in 1998 declared 96 sq km of the village forest as a sacred sanctuary to protect all wildlife in general and the Blythe's Tragopan, an endangered pheasant and the State Bird of Nagaland in particular. While the sanctuary is an ideal place for trekking, Khonoma also offers walks through some legendary trails which make one recall the days of head-hunting and the time when man and spirits were believed to have lived closely. Among these, the Chada-Cha trail, with 12 legendary spots, is the most popular. The best time to visit the village is the Angami month of Kesie (February) when it celebrates the Sekrenyi festival for ten days.

Mizoram: Thanzawl

Thanzawl is located about 90 km from Aizawl, the Mizoram capital. The Tropic of Cancer runs through this picturesque village, which is an important centre of traditional Mizo handloom industry and produces rich and colourful varieties of handloom fabrics. The drive on the winding mountain road to Thanzawl is amazing, providing spectacular views of clouds floating below it over rolling green hills. Thanzawl has several historical sites, as also nature parks and waterfalls. The health-conscious visitors can also visit the state's only golf course here, as also a wellness spa equipped with state-of-the-art facilities.

Thanzawl also has a deer park, which is a mini zoo and the only park of its kind in the state, which particularly conserves the highly endangered Sambar Deer. There is also a pony riding facility, while boat riding on a beautiful lake is another activity that visitors enjoy.

There are 30 log-huts to accommodate tourists at Thenzawl, apart from a food court and an open-air theatre. Close by is Hmulfang—a traditional Mizo village preserved particularly for giving a taste of typical Mizo rural life, culture and traditional food to the visitor. There are also a number of mini tree-houses around. Close to Thenzawl are two waterfalls, the Tuirihiau Fall and Vantawng Fall, both of which empty the gurgling water to the Vanva river. One can step inside from behind the Tuirihiau Fall as it caves like an arc to literally have an inside view of the waterfall. On the outskirts of the village is the Chawngchilhi Cave. Local people believe that this cave is the original location of a Mizo folk story in which a lady falls in love with a snake.

Tripura: Matabari

A visit to Tripura remains incomplete if one does not pay a visit to the Tripura Sundari Temple, located about 55 km outside Agartala, the state capital. Set in a rural ambience at Matabari, the temple is one of the 51 holy *shaktipeeths* (shrine of the goddess of Shakti) in India as per Hindu mythology. According to Hindu mythology, Lord

Vishnu had cut off the body of Mata Sati, after her death, with a *Sudarshan Chakra*. Fifty-one different pieces of her body fell at different places throughout the country which came to be known as *Shaktipeeths*. At Matabari in Tripura fell the right foot of Mata Sati. Here goddess Kali is worshipped in her *Shorashi* – 16-year-old girl – incarnation, while a smaller idol of Maa Kali or *Chotto Maa* stands beside the presiding deity. Constructed in 1501 AD by the then Tripura Maharaja Dhanya Manikya, it has the beautiful Kalyan Sagar lake.

Conclusion

In addition to the above mentioned destinations, there are several other rural destinations spread in the North-eastern Region waiting to be explored by visitors from outside. Those willing to visit Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland, however, have to procure Inner Line Permits (ILP) which can be obtained online by going to the official websites of the respective state governments.

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Tourism in Jammu and Kashmir

Jitendra Lamba

The Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir is one of the most popular tourist destinations globally. Both the regions of Jammu and Kashmir offer a great deal of promise for both local and foreign visitors. There are many potential tourist hotspots with the natural and cultural elements to draw large numbers of visitors but have yet to be discovered. Excellent weather, stunning lakes, adventure sports areas, wildlife, trout fish, natural and man-made parks like Shalimar and Nishat from the Mughul era, ferns and firs, alpine forests, wild waterfalls and streams, etc., are only some of the area's many natural treasures worth mentioning. The Union Territory has some of the most prominent Hindu temples, historical buildings, a multitude of local festivals, unique cuisine, and handicrafts such as delicate and beautiful woodwork, woolens, carpets, and paper mache, among others. There has been a lot of focus by the government on the tourism industry to increase and develop tourism in the area. A tourism policy has been put in place along with the New Film Policy.

"In truth, the kingdom surpasses in beauty all that my warmest imagination had anticipated"; Dennis, the first European traveller to Kashmir, said about the Kashmir in 1665.

The charm of the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir's as a tourist destination is neither new nor unexpected. Located amid the vast Himalayan range, Kashmir has a bounty of natural beauty including lush green meadows, towering snow-capped mountains, and a plethora of picturesque rivers and rivulets as several notable large lakes.

Sir Walter Lawrence writes in his book, "The Valley of Kashmir" that in latitude, Kashmir corresponds with Peshawar, Baghdad and Damascus in Asia, with Fez in Morocco and South

Carolina in America, but it presents none of the characteristics of those countries. People have linked the climate of Kashmir to that of Switzerland until the end of May and of Southern France in July and August. But it is impossible to speak of Kashmir as possessing any one climate or group of characteristics. Every thousand feet of elevation brings some new phase of climate and vegetation. In fact, climatic variations are found even at the micro-level."

It is home to many plants and animals due to its unique geographic and climatic conditions.



(Jitendra Lamba)

Pine, deodar, and fir trees of the highest quality can be found in its forests. Apple, walnut, almond, pear, and cherry orchards are a sight to see. The fields of saffron, one of the most valuable flowers, are grown in the plains of Pampore; the bloom of these flowers is another captivating sight. Winter in Kashmir is a whitewashed wonderland, blanketed in fluffy snow and packed with thrill-seeking skiers.

The lakes, especially the Dal Lake, are another mesmerising charm where the tourists flock. Dal lake is one of the most famous lakes globally and the second-largest in J&K. Poets have been drawn here for ages. The Sufi temples and forts all around Kashmir are part of the rich history and culture, well documented right from the times of Rajatarangini, which is the history of Kashmir written by Kalhana in 1148 A.D.

As per the estimations provided by the government, the Valley has received over 5.8 lakh visitors through April 2022 this year; these data suggest a considerably substantial boost in the tourist footfall. This enormous growth, five times the number of visitors who arrived in the same period last year, has been hailed as the "golden period" on the tourism front, making J&K the sixth-largest tourist destination in India in terms of tourist influx.

Tourism is one of the most important economic sectors in this Union Territory (UT). It has contributed significantly to the economic growth, notably in the Valley. The industry has given jobs to many people, especially young people. It has also helped the primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors of the economy in the UT, which depends a lot on this industry.

Religious tourism has traditionally been a significant industry in Jammu. It has contributed significantly to the economy, with a vast populace reliant on it for their living. Over time, the number of visitors has continuously increased. The corridor between Jammu, Katra, and the Vaishno Devi Temple has been Jammu's most popular destination. There are, however, several other sites that are now gaining prominence and bringing visitors. Several historic and prehistoric sites are found in the Jammu region, which has always fascinated historians. However, an increasing

interest in these monuments is helping preserving and bringing awareness about the same.

Therefore, the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir offers several tourist spots, some of which are pretty well-known. In contrast, others remain inaccessible owing to a lack of infrastructure and awareness. Following are a few of these locations that are either already well-known or have the potential to draw a large number of visitors.

Shri Mata Vaishno Devi is a well-known pilgrimage site which people from all over the country visit. It emphasises Shri Mata Vaishno Devi's religious significance. As a result, it has earned a spot on India's tourist map and is now regarded as a destination for religious tourism. With each passing year, the number of pilgrims visiting the shrine grows. The yearly number of yatrais visiting Vaishno Devi has touched one crore. Vaishno Devi is located at the height of 1,600 metres in the Trikuta Mountains of the Shivalik Range in the Reasi District of Jammu and is a 12 km hike through expansive woods and snow-capped mountains from the Katra base camp. For lodging of yatrais at the base camp, every hotel style, ranging from luxury to budget, is available. Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board is putting up constant efforts to improve the infrastructure and the experience of the pilgrims and make their visit comfortable.

Ragunath Temple is another pilgrimages site thronged by thousands of devotees. Raghunath Temple has a prominent position among Jammu's temples due to its location in the city's centre. Maharaja Gulab Singh began construction on the temple in 1835 A.D. His son, Maharaja Ranbir Singh, finished it in 1860 A.D. Three sides of the inner walls of the main temple are covered with gold sheets. Dedicated to Lord Rama, this temple complex is unique, unusual and the largest in northern India. The Raghunath temple, which can be seen at the entrance of the Ragunath bazaar, is from where the bazaar got its name.

Shahdra Sharief, one of the region's most revered shrines, is roughly 177 km from Jammu. Thousands of believers visit the shrine established in the 19th century on a hilltop in the Rajouri district every day. Since a Hindu ruler built it to honour a Muslim saint, it is a beautiful emblem

of religious peace in the country's history. People from all across the nation come to this shrine to pay their respects to the holy saint, regardless of their religious or cultural differences.

In addition, J&K features several historical landmarks: Chingus Sarai is an example of the solid historical relationship the place lies. The Persian word "chingus" means "intestine." On November 8, 1627, Jehangir died here en route to Delhi. Noor Jehan had Jehangir's Incard buried in the Chingus Sarai to avoid the corpse's decomposition. The corpse was subsequently embalmed and sent to Lahore for burial. Today, Chingus Sarai is surrounded by a forest, and few people travel this road since the NH-1 route from Jammu to Srinagar is better and shorter, which otherwise has one of the many rest houses built on the road for travellers.

Buffiaz is a lovely hill located 39 km from the city of Poonch. Alexander the Great invaded the Poonch region in 326 B.C. to defeat Porus and capture the wealthy Poonch State. Bucephalus was the name of Alexander's horse, which died and was buried along the river bank at this location; since then, the area has been known as Buffiaz. This is also the starting point of the beautiful and

famous Mughal Road.

Gulmarg is located 51 km from Srinagar. The town is reachable by road from Srinagar through the Tangmarg route. In the last 12 km before reaching Gulmarg, the trail rises steeply through pine and fir woods. It is one of the most popular holiday and sports vacation destinations. The site's prominence is mainly attributable to its unique climate and natural beauty. Its tourism history extends more than five centuries. Gulmarg (Meadow of Flowers), appropriately named for the abundance of flowers, is surrounded by mountains and low uneven landscapes. During the winter, Gulmarg is renowned for its skiing, in which national and international athletes compete annually. All layon of vegetation here are affected by a variety of topographical characteristics, including height, slope steepness, exposure to light and wind, and the orientation of mountain ranges. The region's abundant flora adds to the region's natural attractiveness.

Gulmarg has been made the hub of winter sports to promote winter sports, focusing on the winter Olympics. Also, a National Centre of Excellence has been announced to come up at Gulmarg to groom the players in skiing and other



(Dr. Lukh)

winter sports such as tobogganing, snowboarding, and heli-skiing. According to CNN, Gulmarg is the "heartland of winter sports in India", rated Asia's seventh best ski destination.

Gurez Valley is situated 66 kilometres north of the town of Bandipora at the height of 2,500 metres. Gurez has natural beauty, vast pastures, and green meadows. Mountains on all sides surround it. These immense mountains are home to the snow leopard, hangul, musk deer, and markhor and are renowned for their abundance of plant life. It is shut off from the rest of the world during the winter for extended periods. It was once the start of the famous Silk Road from Europe to Kashgar, China. It also is a base camp for some fantastic trekking expeditions. The area has a lot of potential: the Kishenganga river flows through Gurez, making it suitable for white-water rafting, kayaking, canoeing, and fishing.

Twenty Kilometres from Gurez Valley is Tulail Valley, one of the most beautiful valleys. It is also home to the oldest tribe of Kashmir and features gorgeous log cabins, an incredible landscape, distinctive flora, and unique culture. Some of the famous trout fish are found in the Tulail Valley.

The Lolab Valley, located 9 km from Kupwara town, is another stunning destination. Rejuvenation can be achieved in the awe-inspiring landscape and majestic mountains. Despite this, it is still one of the less-travelled locations, making it even more lovely. Because of this, it's a great place to unplug and reconnect with nature without being distracted by technological distractions. Kalaroo is one of the smaller valleys in Lolab. The caverns at Kalaroo are renowned, and the legend goes that they lead to Russia. However, two American explorers entered these caverns in 2018, refuting any link to Russia.

At an elevation of 10,000 feet above sea level, the Bungus valley is another natural wonder in the Kupwara region, roughly 128 kilometres from Srinagar. Lush green meadows and breathtaking mountains surround it. Aside from the native Gujjar tribal people and a few shepherds, the Bungus valley is a new tourist attraction in Kashmir with no signs of human settlement. Encircled by spectacular snow-capped mountains and lush green woods, the Bungus valley offers unmatched

visual splendour, which demonstrates the region's immense tourism potential.

About 45 km from Anantnag lies Pahalgam, a significant tourist destination in J&K. Natural and artificial attractions may be found across the area. A popular tourist resort, Pahalgam, is on the banks of the Lidder river, which is a significant attraction for visitors. Beautiful parks, crystal-clear Lidder River and the mountains are covered with fir trees. The grasslands are dotted with flowers. The location is excellent for a typical hill station vacation, allowing to rest in the truest sense of the term. Trekking, trout fishing and white-water rafting are the most popular summer activities.

Pahalgam is also associated with the annual pilgrimage - Amarnath Yatra. It is a starting point for Yatra. Every year, thousands of devotees from across the country take this pilgrimage.

The picturesque Tullian Lake is a pleasant sight at an elevation of 3,400 metres (11,000 feet). Ardent hikers frequent the area. The hike begins in Pahalgam and ascends to the mountains via the Baisaran path. Depending on the weather, one may pony ride to Baisaran, a vast meadow in the centre of a coniferous forest surrounded by mountain peaks. This Tullian lake (3700 m) is shorter than a Sourse lake but more extended, and it is surrounded by snow for most of the year. However, one can get a feeling of an "out-of-this-world" experience after arriving here.

Sonamarg 'Golden Meadow' is an alpine valley located at the height of 2,740 metres above sea level on the banks of Sindhi Nallah. It is located 87 km from Srinagar and is surrounded by the towering Himalayan peaks. Sonamarg has served as the road to one of the most important pilgrimage destinations - the Amarnath cave. It has been a significant tourist destination for centuries. Since the route between Srinagar and Leh was opened to vehicles, visitors have increased dramatically. Sonamarg's position between Ladakh and the Holy Amarnath Cave has also substantially elevated its significance.

One of the most popular places to visit in Kashmir has long been Srinagar's Tulip Garden, which boasts the most incredible tulips collection in Asia at over one million. The tulip garden in Srinagar is located on a plot of ground that it

thirty hectares in size and offers, in addition to tulips, a wide selection of daffodils, Thysan, and Muscari flowers. The tulips, which are around 15 lakhs in over 68 different varieties, continue to be a significant attraction. The average lifespan of a tulip flower is three to four weeks; however, when the tulip bulbs in the garden are planted in a phased fashion, they tend to remain for at least a month or more. The usual lifespan of a tulip flower is three to four weeks.

Lakes, meadows, and glaciers can be found all over the Union Territory of J&K, making it one of the most beautiful places to visit in India. There are just a few of the tourist destinations located in Jammu and Kashmir. However, there are many more spots, each of which deserves its extensive description.

The J&K government plans to offer 75 offbeat track locations for adventure seekers, trekkers and foreign tourists to enjoy nature's wildness via homestays.

The state government anticipates a significant increase in the number of tourists in 2022. It's expected that number of visitors would break every record set before this one. This boost is partly due to the importance of refurbished infrastructure in expanding tourism in J&K, including significantly better road and air connections. The total travel time has decreased due to the better condition of the roads between Jammu and Srinagar. Additionally, the government has prioritised advertising Jammu and Kashmir as tourist destinations in other parts of the country. This combination of variables will be a driving force behind an increase in tourism across the UT next year.

Because of the increase in the number of visitors, the traffic at Srinagar International Airport has reached an all-time high. More than 50 flights arrive and depart each day at Srinagar Airport. Direct flights between Srinagar and Sharjah have been introduced to boost tourism in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K).

The Government of Jammu and Kashmir has recently come up with a New Film Policy to increase both tourism and investment in the union territory. The goal is to build and offer Jammu and Kashmir a destination for shootings. It ensures administrative help to simplify the process of filmmaking in the UT by establishing a Single Window Cell to issue a licence for shooting films as quickly as possible, ideally between two and four weeks. Kashmir, a location that was previously a favourite of both filmmakers and audiences alike, is seeing a renaissance in the Indian film industry's long-running love affair with the region.

Tourism has unquestionably emerged as a tool for job creation, poverty reduction, and sustainable human development. Tourism has had a significant economic influence on travel, commerce, and hospitality. There is something for everyone to enjoy in J&K. A refuge of tranquility and quiet for the weary and stressed and a haven for athletes. Poets may find inspiration here. A treasure trove of the region's rich oral history and artefacts may benefit the historians. It's a haven for artists looking to create bright, new unimaginable landscapes.

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Kurukshetra

FORTHCOMING ISSUE

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Tourism for AatmaNirbhar Bharat

Dr. Anurag Singh Paswan

India due to its vast geography and rich cultural inheritances has huge potential for rural tourism. Rural tourism has a number of benefits for both rural and non-rural consumers. Due to all these benefits, it is often regarded as one of the drivers of AatmaNirbhar Bharat. Recognising this potential of rural tourism, the Government of India has launched various programmes to encourage it in India. Despite all these efforts, there are some challenges in the implementation of rural tourism projects that can be overcome by steps including, skill development of natives, and improving the managerial skills of the service providers.



Since ancient times, India has been regarded as a paradise for tourists. The vast geography of India provides immense opportunities to develop different forms of tourism in India. In recent times, India has recognised many niche areas in tourism, rural tourism being one of them. It has been realised that the limitless potential of tourism can be harnessed for rural development and growth. This growth will not only benefit the rural areas but will be helpful in sharing the load of urban areas which are often overburdened as the drivers of growth for the nation.

According to United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), rural tourism is a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's experience is related to a wide range of products generally

linked to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle/culture, and sightseeing. Rural tourism includes places in non-urban (rural) areas which have low population density, landscape and land-use is dominated by agriculture and forestry and people follow traditional social structure and lifestyle.

Rural tourism showcasing the unique experiences of Indian villages and closely related less explored areas of tourism such as eco-tourism, farm tourism, adventure tourism, etc. provides a way to promote sustainable and responsible tourism in the country. It not only withdraws tourists from overcrowded popular tourist places but also provides an experience of a healthy and culturally rich life that can rejuvenate them. Apart from it, it has the capability to revitalise

local art and crafts and prevent viable traditional occupations from being displaced.

This article explores many facets of rural tourism in India including the challenges faced by it and the possible solutions for it. It also describes why India can act as the hotspot for the development of rural tourism and how rural tourism can act as a key to a self-reliant India.

India as the Hotspot for Rural Tourism

The extensive geographical and rich cultural inheritance of India makes it a unique spot for exploiting the opportunity of niche tourism, with rural tourism as one of them. Currently, the rural economy accounts for 45% percent of India's national income, 68 percent of the total population, 64 percent of total expenditure, and 33 percent of savings⁷. This vast expanse of the rural economy and the different geographical features, including deserts, mountains, plains, plateaus, islands, and coast, and four biodiversity

hotspots of a total of 36 in the world, results in the huge potential for rural tourism in India.

Also, the variety of cultural patterns showcased in India in the form of different lifestyles, practices, art, craft, and festivals can be incorporated and leveraged in rural tourism. Besides, India is rich in heritage and offers 40 World Heritage sites which are enough to attract tourists from any part of the world.

The improved road and rail connectivity within the country is again one of the major strengths in the field of rural tourism. The incessant efforts of the National Highway Authority of India and intensive road development under Pradhan Mantri Gramin Sadak Yojana have connected the remote rural areas with the mainframe of the country and made them highly accessible.

In addition to the above factors, the demography of India is also playing and rather going to play an important role in boosting rural



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Yadav P (July 2011), Indian Journal of Science and Technology, 65(1), 42-55



tourism in India. A major chunk of our population is now part of a new segment known as 'millennials'. Millennials are known to live for the experience. They are unconventional, adventurous, and open to discovering new cultures. They are no more just interested in sightseeing but rather indulging in experiential travel so that they can immerse themselves completely in their native culture. They want to discover new cultures that give them authentic experiences in every facet of travel, especially in the cuisines and local crafts. Thus, rural tourism provides them this opportunity in the form of region-based agriculture farms, staying facilities, and authentic local cuisines.

Rural Tourism-Key to Aatma Nirbhar Bharat

Aatma Nirbhar Bharat which literally translates into self-reliant India is a vision to see India as a strong, independent, and locally driven economy which will be self-sustaining and self-generating. In order to achieve this goal, it is very important to harness the local opportunities, empower the individuals and enterprises and use them to transform the structure of the Indian economy.

The total transformation of the Indian economy is not possible until the rural sector

of the country is not developed. Although for a long time, it has been a notion that promoting agriculture is the only way to do so but in the wake of the success of service-driven economies and unforeseen situations like the COVID-19 pandemic, it is very necessary to view rural economy with different perspectives.

As stated before, rural economy is full of potential and rural tourism is one of them. Rural tourism provides ample opportunities of self-reliance to the rural sector. The villages are repositories of the country's culture, tradition, crafts, heritage and agri-practices. Developing and promoting these local products through tourism can generate income and jobs in rural areas and empower local communities, youth, and women, fulfilling the vision of Aatma Nirbhar Bharat. This will not only preserve the culture and heritage of the country but will also provide skill development in tourism-related job roles such as guides, drivers, cooks, housekeeping, etc to the tourists.

Rural tourism will provide an enormous potential for entrepreneurship in rural areas. It will create the space for various support activities like the formation of digital platforms, marketing agencies, tour operators, etc, and hence generate immense entrepreneurial opportunities for the



local population.

The skill development of the rural population will not be limited to some white-collar jobs. The rural labor forces will be trained for digital technologies, IT services, and the creation of online platforms. Digital technologies and platforms will provide new opportunities for rural entrepreneurs to improve their market access and financial inclusion. Digital technologies will permit the rural entrepreneurs to come over the geographic drawbacks and lack of other marketing modes by employing the power of social media, cloud computing, and internet, etc.

Employment generation within the rural boundaries will encourage people to stay in the villages and work for the development of rural areas. This will mitigate their migration to urban areas in the search of job opportunities.

Rural tourism will also act as a sustainable source of living for the rural population. As rural economies are predominantly agriculture-based, there is always a risk of seasonality which can affect the income-generating opportunities for rural people. In such a scenario rural tourism will be a sustainable livelihood option for rural people. Along with this, rural tourism will also

act as a buffer for the potential environmental hazards which occur due to increased footfall of the tourists in the already overpopulated popular regions. This type of tourism is nature-based and thus requires the maintenance of natural habitat by both tourists and service providers. In this way, tourists will be paying to enjoy the nature surrounding as well as for the protection of the nature in the area.

Boosting Rural Tourism

After considering all the facts discussed above, the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India has launched various programmes and initiatives to encourage rural tourism. The Ministry of Tourism has recognised rural tourism as a niche area of tourism and has been actively working to promote and develop it as the driver of growth for the rural economy.

Prior to the launch of the Swadesh Darshan scheme, Product Infrastructure Development for Destinations and Circuits (PIDDC) was the major tourist infrastructure development scheme of the Government of India. The Rural Tourism Infrastructure Development Component, which is part of the PIDDC specifically focussed on the development of rural tourism in India, it undertook

activities like improvement of the surroundings of the village which includes activities like landscaping, development of parks, fencing, compound walls, lighting in the village, improvement in solid waste and sewerage management, and procurement of equipment directly related to tourism, like Water Sports, Adventure Sports, etc.

Recognising the prospects of rural tourism in the country, the Ministry of Tourism, under the Swadesh Darshan Scheme, has identified Rural Circuit as one of the fifteen thematic circuits for development. The main aim behind it is to leverage tourism as the major force to reinvigorate the rural economy and give both domestic and international tourists a glimpse of the culturally rich rural aspect of the country. Under this scheme, till date, two rural circuits in Bihar and Kerala have been sanctioned with total assistance of 125.02 crores.

Ministry of Tourism has recently drafted a Draft National Strategy and Roadmap for Rural Tourism, which centres on developing and promoting local products through tourism which will, in turn, result in the generation of income and jobs in rural areas. This will empower local communities fulfilling the vision of Aatma Nirbhar Bharat. The strategy mainly focuses on model policies and best practices for rural tourism, digital technologies, and platforms for rural tourism, developing clusters for rural tourism, marketing support for rural tourism, capacity building

of stakeholders, governance and institutional framework.

Rural Tourism is a multidisciplinary subject that involves a large number of stakeholders. Therefore, apart from schemes of the Ministry of Tourism, schemes from other departments and Ministries have also contributed to the growth of rural tourism. Like the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD), under their scheme of Shyama Prasad Mukherji Rural Mission (SPMRM), has suggested twenty-one components as desirable for the cluster development, and Tourism Promotion is one of the components. Similarly, under Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Yojana, a skill development programme of the Government of India, training is provided in Tourism and Hospitality. Here, rural youth is trained for job roles such as guide, driver, cook, housekeeping, and other hospitality staff to the locals.

Challenges Faced by Rural Tourism

Despite all these efforts, there are some common challenges faced by rural tourism projects in India. Rural markets are often characterised by the rural population which is still poor and less literate than their urban counterparts. Therefore, these villagers have less awareness about displaying their culture and heritages in front of the tourists visiting their places. Normally, they are not very much aware of the potentiality of rural tourism



that can act as an alternative source of earning for them. Moreover, there are lots of hindrances in the rural markets which are still in their primitive self. Long-distance from nearby towns, absence of proper mode of surface transportation, lack of basic infrastructure, inadequate lodging – feeding, amusement facilities, inconsistent electricity, telecommunication problem, etc. are some of the reasons because of which these areas are not able to utilize their tourism resources at best.

Apart from it, the major problem of these rural tourism projects is marketing. The travellers or tourists have no information about these rural tourism projects. Since, no knowledge exists among the target group, the footfall at these sites is less than expected.

These projects also face some other problems like lack of trained manpower, insufficient financial support to start the new facility or business, lack of involvement of the local community, and maintenance of the project over the time.

Recommendations to Encourage Rural Tourism

The above challenges can be overcome by taking a number of steps and some recommendations are as follows:

1. Before investing in the rural tourism project, viability study of the destination should be conducted, indicating whether the rural tourism project will be successful.
2. Instead of creating many rural tourist destinations for development, handful of projects can be picked which have a popular craft being practiced, or a popular culture being present at the destination, which in turn would be a special attraction for tourists to visit the destination. These popular themes may include handicrafts, folk music, dance, puppet shows, theatre/street dramas, organic farming, herbal, yoga, and meditation centers, ecozones within or around the village, and/or any unique feature (such as the Kila Raipur Sports Festival, Punjab).
3. Connectivity to the rural tourism destination is a major problem and should be the primary focus of the implementing agency.
4. Extensive advertisement through all forms of

media (more specifically social media) should be an integral part of the rural tourism development programme. Any project without an advertising campaign should not be sanctioned unless the rural tourism destination is already very famous amongst tourists. Apart from it, it is necessary to introduce segment-based advertising where each and every segment (like millennials) should be treated as the different target group.

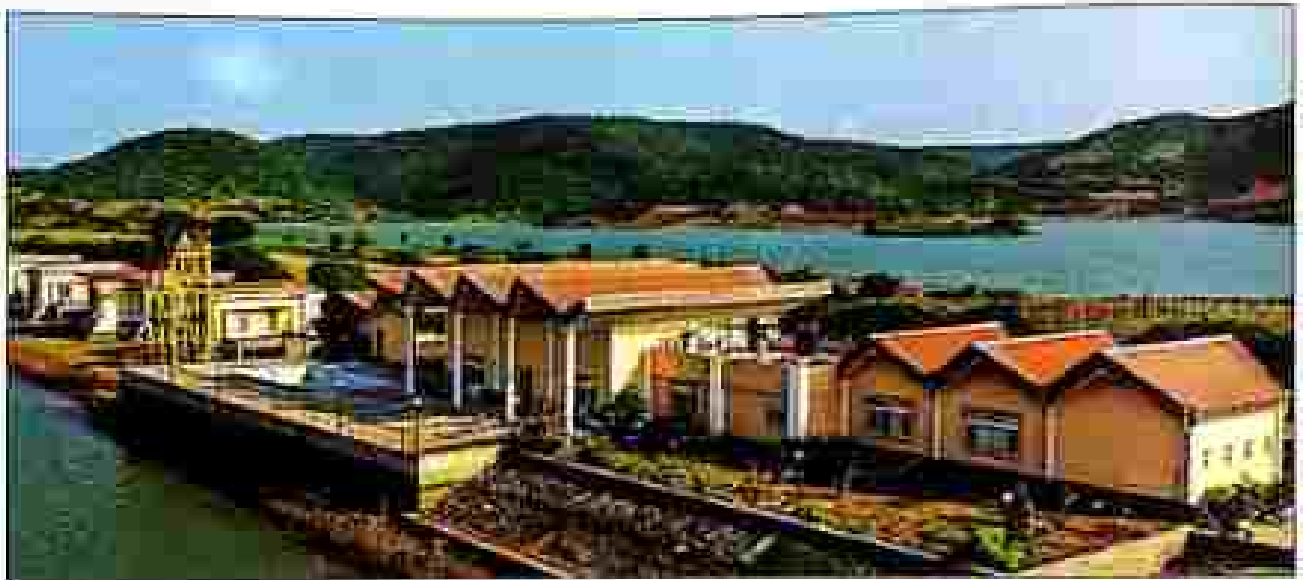
5. Location of the rural tourism destination is also one point for the checklist of successful tourism destination. The rural tourism projects should be in the vicinity of famous tourist spots so that it can attract more and more tourists.
6. Assiduous implementation and maintenance of hardware and software components of the project is necessary.
7. The destinations should be developed as a whole instead of just creating partial infrastructure and providing a few pieces of training to the artisans/beneficiaries. Focus should be on creating an experience for the tourists instead of building monuments and hotels which cannot connect to the local vibe of the destination.
8. The Public-Private-Partnership (PPP) model for developing rural tourism destinations may be considered as an enabler for both the developers and investors for boosting tourism in rural areas and also in the development of these areas – as a result, the socio-economic condition of the local population will effectively improve.
9. Rural Tourism is in the gambit of many ministries like rural development, culture, environment, and tribal welfare and hence the convergence of schemes must be considered for a holistic approach.
10. For the successful implementation of rural tourism projects, the participation of local village panchayat and local stakeholders is crucial.

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Tourism Infrastructure Development

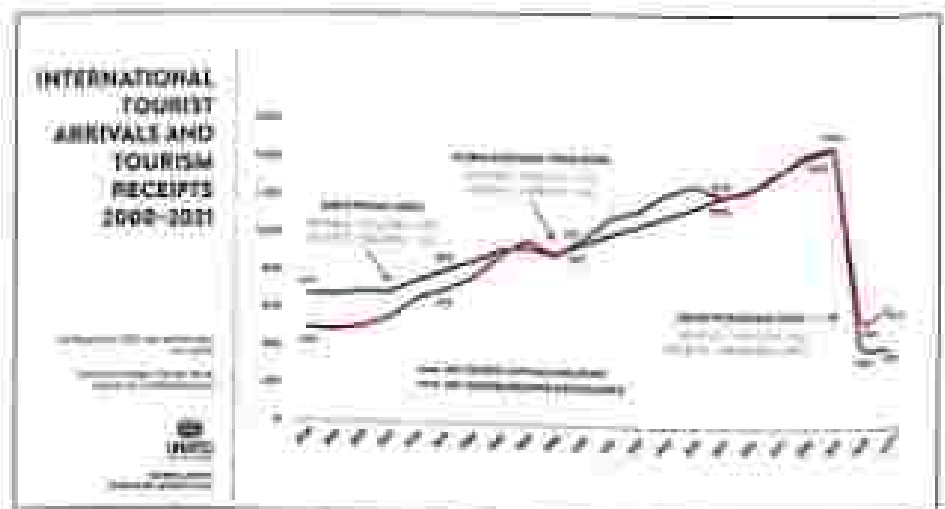
Dr. Suresh Kumar

The rural landscape in India offers myriad potential of being transformed into a tourism product that can attract both domestic as well as international visitors. In order to develop a village as a tourist destination, first step should be to identify the key strength of the village around which the theme of rural tourism can be developed. Key factors which drive growth of tourism; namely, location, proximity to prominent tourist destinations, implementation and maintenance of hardware and software components must be considered.



Tourism thrives on mobility, which got absolutely restricted due to pandemic induced lockdowns that in turn proved to be the most severe blow on tourism in the recorded history. The sector is slowly moving towards a path of recovery. International Tourist Arrivals (ITA) is a prominent global tourism indicator. United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) estimates that internationally there were just 25 million tourist arrivals in 1950, ITA stood at a whopping 1.4 billion in 2019 (consider the year 2019 as the pre-pandemic reference point till when things were moving smoothly in the tourism sector) and it marked 10th consecutive year of sustained growth in ITA.

Tourism has seen continued expansion over time, despite occasional shocks, demonstrating the sector's strength and resilience. From 1950 till date, barring few dip events; namely, September 2001 Terrorist attacks, SARS epidemic 2003, global economic crisis 2008, COVID-19 pandemic induced lockdown 2020, ITA has seen a consistent upsurge.



Source: UNWTO

Evolution of Tourism

In 16th century, the concept of 'Grand Tour' emerged in Europe, especially for educational purposes, where young aristocrats travelled along a well-designed circuit that touched famous centres of culture and philosophy accompanied by a tutor. A Grand Tour lasted for up to 3 years. As a concept it got faded in 19th century. Prominent theme is that only a 'class' was able to afford travel/tourism. From 1950s world witnessed a rapid growth of international mass tourism and its after-effects. This phenomenon was fuelled by major geopolitical changes like industrial revolution (it changed the economic and social systems prevailing at that time including emergence of the working class, increase in material wealth for a large number of workers, paid holidays), end of world war, increased mobility, better communication, availability of tour packages (Thomas Cook invented the concept), etc. The aforesaid changes permitted even 'tourists' to travel. Particularly international travel and tourism transformed from an activity that was once largely done by the upper class, to one enjoyed by the great majority of people, at least in the wealthier, developed countries. The transformative journey is known as the emergence of mass tourism, a process that is described by tourism scholar, John Urry, as the 'democratisation' of tourism.



Platform of Tourism

Irfar Jafari, a leading academic of Tourism Studies, identifies certain stages, or platforms, upon which the study of tourism has been based:

- 1. The Advocacy Platform:** International mass tourism began to increase rapidly from the early 1960s. At this time, tourism was seen primarily as an economic phenomenon, an expanding international business that as an important source of income and employment had the potential to generate economic growth in destination areas. Little concern was shown for the possible impacts of tourism development and, as a result, the study of travel and tourism was focused principally on the economic impacts of tourism, including indicators such as the multiplier effect.
- 2. The Cautionary Platform:** As international tourism grew in both scale and scope, so too did awareness of its negative consequences. As a result, academic attention turned increasingly towards the study of the social, cultural and environmental impacts of travel and tourism. A number of key writers argued for a more cautious approach to the promotion of tourism.
- 3. The Adaptancy Platform:** During the 1980s, as attention continued to focus on the negative impacts of mass tourism, and as a result a principal theme to emerge in the study of travel and tourism was that of Alternative Tourism, preparing the way for the emergence of the topic- Sustainable Tourism. Alternative tourism was concerned with finding, literally, alternatives to mass tourism development that had been so roundly criticised from the 1970s onwards, although, according to some, this represented a somewhat idealistic period in the study of travel and tourism.

Alternative tourism is an umbrella concept consisting of a variety of approaches: eco-tourism, agro-tourism, community tourism, ethical tourism, responsible tourism, sustainable tourism, etc. There are many possible alternative approaches that allow getting out of the dominant mass

Tourism model. Beyond the economic issues of tourism, social and cultural dimensions, the relationship to the environment, the participation of host communities are also considered. It aims at developing sustainable tourism strategies with more significant economic benefits for the host country. Rural tourism is a subset of alternative tourism.

Tourism Indicators of India

In the year 2019, during India's 73rd Independence Day, the Prime Minister of India urged people to travel to at least 15 tourist destinations within India by 2022. He said that their visits would boost tourism and will help to create better facilities in the destinations. In response to that, the Ministry of Tourism, in November 2019, launched the *Dekho Aapko Desh* programme. A big chunk of the tourism in India is 'Domestic Tourism' (tourism within the country). Considering the year 2019 as the normal reference point (pre-pandemic), following data should be focussed upon.

Number of International Tourist Arrivals in India in 2019 (million) Annual Growth Rate (3.7%)	17.42
Number of Domestic Tourist Visits in 2019 (million) Annual Growth Rate (11.9%)	1854.93
No. of Indian Nationals Departures from India in 2019 (million) Annual Growth Rate(9.8%)	26.19

Source: India Tourism Statistics 2020, Ministry of Tourism.

In response to the pandemic, an economic package was announced on 12 May 2020. The term 'Aatma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyan' or 'Self-Reliant India Mission' was first mentioned in this announcement. The concept of 'Aatma Nirbhar' in the context of tourism can be interpreted as an attempt to enhance domestic tourism within India. As depicted above in the table, the percentage of Indian travellers visiting foreign countries witnessed an annual growth rate of 9.8 percent in 2019. 'Aatma Nirbhar' would also aim at finding ways through which these outbound tourists can be motivated to prioritise India as their destination choice. Last but not the least,

self-reliance also means aiming for a higher share of international tourist arrivals for India.

Rural Tourism – An Indian Perspective

Tourism comes under the service sector. It offers immense work opportunities, and the backward linkages and multiplier effects extend to manufacturing industries and even agriculture. With increasing incomes, mobility and better connectivity, it is going to grow at an even faster rate. Let us assess the need for alternative forms of tourism in India with the help of statistical data on tourism arrivals at a sought-after tourist destination in India. With an annual flow of over 80 lakh tourists as against the state's population of a little over 18 lakh, Goa, is on the brink of a breakdown. While tourism growth is great news overall, the excessive burden on a handful of destinations, be it hill stations or that located seaside, is doing tremendous damage to India's tourism hotspots, which are crumbling. Many countries are no longer willing to put up with this consistent deterioration and are taking some drastic steps to set things right. As a country, India needs alternative destinations to offset the pressure on destinations like Goa, Shimla, etc. which are witnessing fatigue and deterioration due to mass tourism. Therefore, the concept of Rural Tourism is definitely useful for a country like India, where almost 67 percent of the population resides in its 6 million villages. Each village is unique in terms of the tourism resources it has which can be transformed into a tourism product.

The 'Best Tourism Villages' by UNWTO pilot initiative aims to award those villages which are outstanding examples of rural destinations and showcase good practices in line with its specified nine evaluation areas. It aims to support villages to enhance their rural tourism potential through training and access to opportunities for improvement. In the year 2021, Ministry of Tourism recommended three villages for the UNWTO Best Tourism Village entry from India. These were Kongthong in Meghalaya, Ladhpora khas in Madhya Pradesh, and Pochampally in Telangana. Pochampally village was selected as one of the best tourism villages by the UNWTO. Pochampally is often referred to as the 'Silk City of India' for the exquisite saris that are woven through a unique style called 'ikat'. This style, Pochampally ikat, received a Geographical Indicator Status in



Source: IWYTO

2004. International acclaim for a village can act as a motivator (competition) for many other villages which is required for rural tourism to thrive.

Rural Tourism for the first time was identified as one of the focus areas in India's National Tourism Policy 2002. The rural life in India is where you meet the 'real India'. Developing rural economy and creating jobs and opportunities in rural areas is therefore essential for 'Atma Nirbhar Bharat'. Rural tourism can act as a non-farm income source. In the year 2022, Ministry of Tourism has prepared the Draft National Tourism Policy which says five key areas would be given significant focus in the next ten years — Green Tourism, Digital Tourism, Destination Management, Skilling the Hospitality Sector and Supporting Tourism-related to MSMEs. Developing rural tourism may cover many of the key areas of the draft tourism policy.

Tourism Infrastructure Development-3 'A' Approach

There can be no tourism without a destination. For a destination to develop and sustain itself, the following A's (see boxes below) are fundamentally important. These three A's have to be present in sync for any form of tourism to thrive, including rural tourism. An attempt has been made to correlate the 'A's with Rural Tourism.

'Attraction' refers to those features that pull or attract tourists to a destination. There is no easy way to enumerate or analyse attraction that a place offers.

In order to simplify, rural resources/attractions can be sub-divided into three categories:

1. Resources by virtue of geographical and climatic characteristics of the region, flora and fauna, rivers, landscape, scenic beauty, etc.
2. Aspects of the rural culture like village folklore, handicrafts, textile products, social bonds, etc.
3. Farm produce and practices like sowing, harvesting, etc.

'Accessibility' refers to how the tourist destination can be reached, mainly in terms of transportation (different modes). A destination may have all the attractions needed for being popular but if it is not linked properly, it forces the tourists to avoid the destination.

Following is a brief overview of prominent transport infrastructure development initiatives which in turn benefit rural tourism also.

Road Transport Infrastructure Initiatives: Indian Roads are classified mainly into 7 types: National Highways, State Highways, District Roads, Village Roads, Border Roads, and Expressways. India has the lowest density of expressways in the world. Some of the most well-known completed expressway projects are: Agra-Lucknow Expressway (302 km), Yamuna Expressway (185 km), Mumbai-Nashik Expressway (150 km), Eastern Peripheral Expressway (135 km). Ganga Expressway project, in Uttar Pradesh connecting Meerut and Prayagrah.

will be the longest expressway of India on completion. Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana is a project launched in 2000 (is still active, undertaken by the Ministry of Rural Development) to provide good all-weather road connectivity to all villages in India. Bharatmala is a road infrastructure project (launched in 2015-active as of now) undertaken by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways.

Water Transport Infrastructure Initiatives: India is a land of rivers. It has a coastline of 7500 km; it has more than 15,000 km of navigable waterways. Under the Sagarmala Project (launched in 2015, active as of now, undertaken by the Ministry of Shipping), high quality roads will be constructed in the coastal areas, areas adjoining ports, ensuring development of coastal economic zones, inland waterways. This project will also boost exports and employment. National Waterways are an important mode of transport for both passengers and cargo. In India, the National Waterways include Inland waterways and sea routes for trade purposes. Navigable waterways

include rivers, backwaters, canals, creeks, and so on. In 1986, the Government of India created the Inland Waterways Authority of India which is a statutory body responsible for the waterways in India. The National Waterways Act, 2016 was enacted to realise the potential of inland water as a highly economical mode of transport.

Air Transport Infrastructure Initiatives: Ude Desh ka Am Naagrik (UDAN) was launched as a Regional Connectivity Scheme (RCS) under the Ministry of Civil Aviation in 2015, with the objective to develop the regional aviation market and to provide affordable, economically viable and profitable air travel on regional routes to the common man even in small towns. The scheme envisages providing connectivity to unserved and underserved airports of the country through the revival of existing air-strips and airports. The scheme is operational for a period of 10 years. Financial incentives from the Centre, state governments and airport operators are extended to selected airlines to encourage operations from unserved and underserved airports, and keep



Shipwreck in Kerala

airfares affordable. The UDAN 4.2 focuses on connecting smaller airports, along with special helicopter and seaplane routes.

Multi-modal Connectivity: Gati Shakti – National Master Plan for Multi-modal Connectivity was launched in October 2021. Gati Shakti is a national master plan aimed at the coordinated planning and execution of infrastructure projects in India to reduce logistics costs. Gati Shakti is a digital platform that will bring 16 ministries and departments of the Government of India together. It is Rs 100 lakh crore project for developing 'holistic infrastructure'. The existing infrastructure schemes under various ministries will be incorporated into this plan, including Sagarmala, Bharatmala, UDAN scheme, inland waterways, etc. This may provide seamless connectivity to rural tourism sites.

Accommodation includes boarding and lodging facilities for tourists to stay at the destination.

As per Ministry of Tourism, any form of tourism that showcases rural life, art, culture and heritage at rural locations, thereby benefiting local community economically and socially as well as enable interaction between tourists and locals for a more enriching tourism experience can be termed as rural tourism. Therefore, accommodation infrastructure has to be built in the rural area itself as per the core theme of rural tourism. There can't be 'one size fits all' approach to develop it. Role of district administration, Panchayati Raj Institutions, NGO's is crucial regarding the development of accommodation infrastructure. Some examples are given as follows.

1. Rural tourism accommodation infrastructure was developed in Ramn of Kutch, Gujarat, under Endogenous Tourism Project, as a concerted effort of Ministry of Tourism and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) during 2003-07 as Sham-e-Sarhad, Hodka village resort. It is owned and operated by the Village Tourism Committee of Hodka; the resort is run by local community members.
2. Purushwadi is a tribal village, situated in Western Ghats, in the Alola district of

Maharashtra. It has been adopted by an NGO dedicated towards promoting eco-friendly tourism in villages and providing livelihood to the villagers. Accommodation set up creation was facilitated by the NGO. Purushwadi plays host to a Fireflies festival every year, when the monsoons are about to hit India.

Conclusion

The rural landscape in India offers myriad potential of being transformed into a tourism product that can attract both domestic as well as international visitors. An Evaluation cum Impact Study of Rural Tourism Projects of Ministry of Tourism, conducted by AC Nielsen ORG-MARG cited the low tourist flow to project areas and difficult access as the key factors for the failure of almost 31 percent of the projects evaluated. Out of the total 107 projects, 41 projects have been successful, 23 projects have performed averagely and the rest 23 projects have been unsuccessful in attaining the objectives, as per the findings of the report. Accessibility initiatives have been enumerated above from a macro point of view.

In order to develop a village as a tourist destination, first step should be to identify the key strength of the village around which the theme of rural tourism can be developed. Key factors which drive growth of tourism; namely, location, proximity to prominent tourist destinations, implementation and maintenance of hardware and software components must be considered. As a multi-sectoral activity involving multiple service providers, development of rural tourism will involve co-ordinated efforts from a diverse set of stakeholders like different ministries, industries, NGO and host community participation. Rural tourism is an area where a strong public-private partnership is of prime importance, particularly given the number of schemes under ministries beyond tourism, for instance, rural development, culture, environment and tribal welfare. Convergence of schemes must be considered for a holistic approach.

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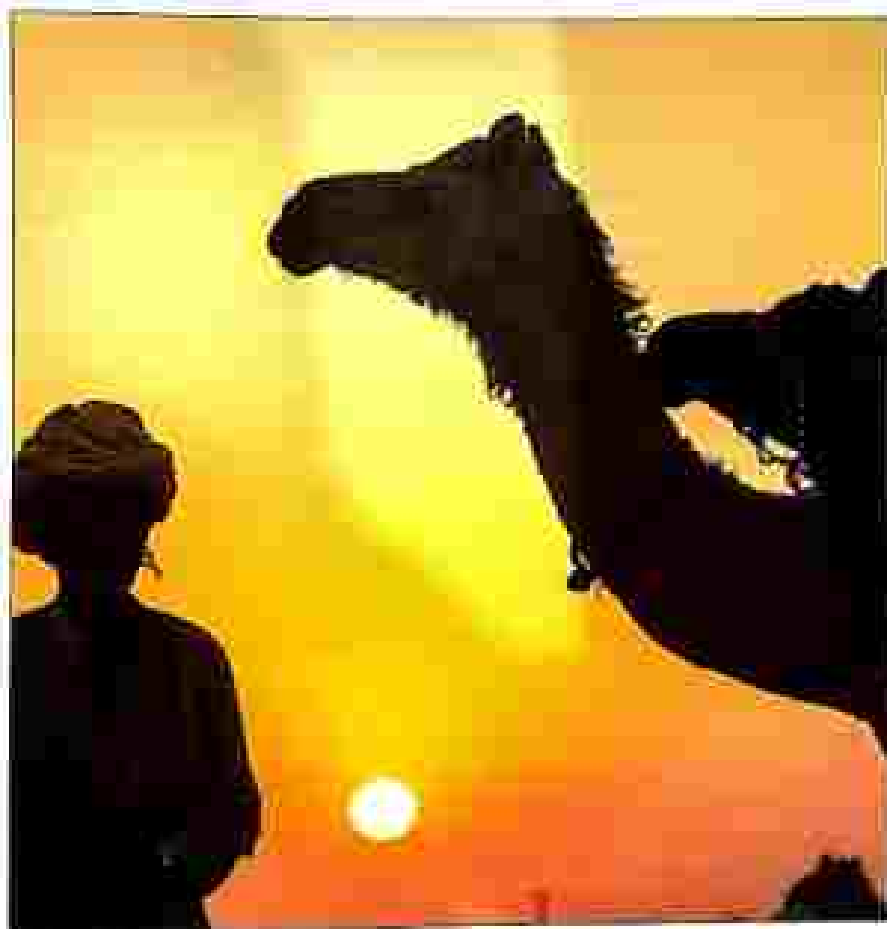
Reviving Tourism post COVID-19 Pandemic

Bhavya Tyagi and Karishma Shrivastava

While the pandemic had a visibly negative impact on tourism, it has opened the possibility for niche tourism related to Ayurveda and wellness. The pandemic has increased awareness about holistic well-being and building immunity as a complement to reactive health interventions and has further facilitated the global positioning of the Ayurvedic system of medicine. Indian travel start-ups have utilized this opportunity to promote travel for wellness which has gained popularity in the last few years. Ayurveda is also an important part of the 'Atal in India' campaign for promoting medical value tourism to India.

India is a mosaic of multicultural experiences with diverse nuances of cuisines, faiths, arts, crafts, history, sports, nature, and tribes. From Great Himalayas in the north, the golden Thar Desert in the West, the majestic wildlife of the East, and the beaches in South India present a distinct geographical entity that has something for every quintessential traveller. We could not agree less with Max Muller who had said, "If I were to look over the whole world to find out the country most richly endowed with all the wealth, power, and beauty that nature can bestow – in some parts a very paradise on earth – I should point to India".

However, much like the rest of the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted all aspects of tourism – a human-centric industry – with a decline in international arrivals of close to 70 percent (UNWTO). According to the Ministry of Tourism, foreign tourist arrivals in March 2020 were almost 64 percent lower compared to the tourist arrivals in March 2019¹. The massive drop in tourism owing to partial/complete lockdowns and restrictions on both domestic and international travel across the world produced cascading effects on governments,



businesses, and local communities leading to a loss of about USD 1.3 trillion in export revenues globally (World Bank). Travel and Tourism have historically contributed significantly to GDP, accounting for 10.3 percent of the global economy in 2019 (World Travel and Tourism Council). The estimated GDP loss in 2020 was about USD 3,435 billion in the baseline scenario as per one study, with Asia being the worst affected region (Pandey et al, 2021). In India alone, it has been estimated

¹<https://tourism.gov.in/sites/default/files/2020-06/1116102019162001105201916107902>

that there were around 40 million direct and indirect job losses in travel and tourism industry, with overall losses to the sector estimated to be to the order of USD 16.7 billion (FICCI 2020; Mallapur 2020).

Despite the challenges presented by the pandemic, there is a unique opportunity for tourism stakeholders in India to reevaluate the current dynamics and effectively revamp the post-pandemic tourism sector recognising that people, groups, institutions, and governments are differently affected by the pandemic and that the recovery path – governed by both social and economic factors – must be nonlinear. A study by Pandey et al. (2021) recommends a RESPOND approach – an acronym for Restart Travel, Establish Protocols, Stimulate Demand, Promote Coordination, Operationalise the New Normal, Nurturing New Options, and Develop Digital Solutions – to combat and mitigate the impact of COVID-19 pandemic and take concrete steps towards sustainable recovery. Several studies have also proposed a charter for sustainable tourism recovery post-pandemic that lists measures such as social distancing, travel and entry restrictions, use of personal protection equipment, safety measures to improve overall medical and health situation, demand monitoring for anticipating changes in tourist behaviour, and widespread use of digital technologies. Four important takeaways emerge from these studies: first, understand the new market trends; second, rebuild a safe, resilient and inclusive tourism ecosystem on the basis of prevailing consumer sentiments; third, rethink tourism to leverage growing interests in areas such as eco-tourism; and fourth, focus on both domestic and international tourism.

The Government of India has also come up with new initiatives and programmes for revitalising the tourism industry in India. In the Union Budget 2022-23, Finance Minister Smt. Nirmala Sitharaman allocated Rs 2,400 crore to the Ministry of Tourism, which is 18.42 percent higher than the allocation made in the previous budget, of which Rs 1,181.50 crore is earmarked for 'Swadesh Darshan' to develop tourist circuits

in the Northeast region, Rs 1,644 crore for tourism infrastructure development, and Rs 235 crore for Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual and Heritage Augmentation Drive (PRASHAD) to stimulate growth in niche tourism segments like religious, wellness, heritage, adventure, MICE among others¹. An Emergency Credit Line Guarantee Scheme (ECLGS) was extended up to March 2023 for COVID-19 affected sectors which will not only accelerate the revival of the tourism sector but also create new jobs². The government is also geared up to welcome tourists in India with the Union Minister of State for Tourism Shri G. Kishan Reddy announcing recently that visas would be given for free to the first five lakh tourists³. Additionally, the Ministry also extended e-visa facilities for travellers from 156 countries.

Hon'ble Prime Minister's 'Vocal for Local' and 'Atma Nirbhar Bharat' initiatives have been effective in promoting domestic tourism and the local economy. The Ministry of Tourism has launched 'Dekho Aapka Desh' under which various promotional activities like webinars, online pledges, and quizzes are undertaken to generate awareness among the public about tourism destinations, local art, and cuisines in the country, including some of the unexplored gems in India. So far, more than 2 lakh citizens have joined the Dekho Aapka Desh (boost domestic tourism) pledge, of which almost 80 percent are between 20 and 45 years of age⁴. This can be seen as a resounding success, as many of the destinations are fully booked for the near future. In order to enhance the trust and confidence of travellers, the Ministry of Tourism and the Quality Council of India designed an innovative programme called System for Assessment, Awareness and Training for Hospitality Industry (SAATHI) in 2020 to implement policies and standard operating procedures (SOPs) for the safe operation of restaurants, hotels, and other such establishments. The Ministry founded a National Tourism Task Force for the revival of the tourism and hospitality sector and released a National Tourism Policy to support tourism, strengthen tourism support functions, and develop tourism sub-sectors. The Ministry

¹ <https://pib.gov.in/PressRelease.aspx?aid=1794323>
² <https://pib.gov.in/PressRelease.aspx?aid=181230>

³ <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressRelease.aspx?aid=182204>
⁴ <https://pib.gov.in/PressRelease.aspx?aid=182204>



The post-pandemic era, in collaboration with Google, interactive content featuring personalised stories is being developed for the Incredible India website and mobile application. Additionally, 360-degree immersive walkthroughs are being curated for major World Heritage sites in India. The proliferation of smart phones and the internet have acted as a catalyst in the speedy digitisation of the travel and hospitality sector. It is common nowadays to pay an auto-rickshaw driver or a street-side vendor through UPI. Even many restaurants have quickly transitioned from paper in-room compendiums to QR code-enabled online ordering and contactless

payment mechanisms to offer convenience as well as boost the confidence of visitors. Traditionally, many luxury hotels have emphasised person-to-person contact. However post-pandemic, some luxury hotels in India, such as ITC and Taj, are moving towards keyless rooms, digital menus, and robot services. An industry-led initiative coordinated by the Ministry of Civil Aviation, Digi Vatra, was launched to facilitate entry and exit based on facial recognition technology at various airport checkpoints for ease of travel of passengers⁴. According to the Amadeus' 'Rethink Travel Global Survey', 84 percent of travellers surveyed said that technology would increase their confidence to travel. Hence, the adoption of IoT technologies by the Indian travel and hospitality industry will allow a smooth recovery of tourism in an uncertain post-pandemic world.

The government has also taken several initiatives to support rural tourism in the country. Under the Product/Infrastructure Development for Destinations and Circuits (PIDDC) scheme, the government has launched a Rural Tourism Development Component to showcase rural life, art, culture, and heritage of villages⁵. Various enterprises and non-governmental organisations are also working towards fostering rural tourism in the country. Grassroots conducts regular tourism programmes, in collaboration with the tourism committee, for the villagers to function as guides, cooks, hosts, etc. Kabani and Uruvu, India-

launched a 24/7 toll-free tourist information helpline in 12 international languages to assist domestic and international tourists. The Ministry had extended the recognition of tour operators, travel agents, and tourist transport operators by six months and also, further simplified the process for stakeholders. To explore the tourism potential of scenic Western Ghats, the Ministry of Railways has also allocated visitadome coaches in several trains enabling passengers to enjoy spectacular views from all directions. The introduction of 600 new Vande Bharat trains and the construction of 25,000 km of new expressways will further improve last-mile connectivity to tourist destinations across India. In an effort to promote religious tourism, IRCTC started Sri Ramayana Yatra special trains in 2021. Other innovative religious tourism packages are also being introduced such as 'Ramayana Trails', 'Buddhist circle', and 'Royal Rajasthan tours'. Travel integrator companies such as Thomas Cook and SOTC Tours are collaborating with various hospitality brands in India to create innovative workstations, wellness breaks, and affordable luxury holidays.

The pandemic has also paved way for innovations and transformations in technology. NITI Aayog has stressed the provision of experiential tourism as the hallmark of the Indian economy in the post-pandemic era, with the widespread use of information technology. Organisations have started using digital technology to enhance tourism experiences for customers in

⁴<https://www.india.gov.in/spotlight/digi-vatra-new-digital-experience-in-travel>
⁵<https://pib.gov.in/newsreleases/printRelease.aspx?relid=122578>



Gopuram of Mari Amman Temple, Chennai

based social enterprises and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) respectively have developed an inclusive community-based tourism programme in backwaters and rural regions. GIAN Foundation, a professional development organisation, initiated the 'Endogenous Tourism for Rural Livelihoods' project in Karakkudi and Kattupuzhal in Tamil Nadu with the support of UNDP and the Government of India to capitalise opportunities for tourism in rural areas.

While the pandemic had a visibly negative impact on tourism, it has opened the possibility for niche tourism related to Ayush and wellness. The pandemic has increased awareness about holistic well-being and budding immunity as a complement to curative health interventions and

has further facilitated the global positioning of the Ayush system of medicine. Indian travel start-ups have utilised this opportunity to promote travel for wellness which has gained popularity in the last few years. Ayush is also an important part of the 'Heal in India' campaign for promoting medical value tourism to India. In such a situation, Ayush tourism can become India's niche opportunity in the tourism industry post the onset of the pandemic.

The Ministry of Tourism has drafted guidelines for wellness tourism. These guidelines address issues regarding making available quality publicity material, training and capacity building for the service providers, participation in international and domestic wellness related



(Tourism is Good)

events, etc. The ministry has also extended its Market Development Assistance (MDA) scheme to wellness tourism service providers including accredited wellness centres⁶.

Furthermore, a MoU has been signed between the Ministry of tourism, United Nations Environment programme (UNEP) and Responsible Tourism Society of India (RTSOI) with an aim to undertake measures to promote and support 'sustainability initiatives' in the tourism sector of each other and work in a collaborative manner wherever possible⁷. This initiative would be instrumental in urging the citizens to resort to sustainable, green travel and transportation systems to further enhance economic growth and accessibility. Additionally, sustainable travel initiatives could prove essential in restoring tourism in the country and boost the sector's performance post an adverse COVID hit.

As various economies of the world are transitioning to relax mobility restrictions, it is imperative to note the extensive potential in India in the fields of environment, spiritual, education and medical tourism. The country's domestic and foreign policy efforts have facilitated an enabling environment for the promotion of the tourism industry. There remains further scope for innovations and adaptations in this regard to leverage the 'new normal' and incorporate solutions abiding to travel protocols and

encouraging safe, inclusive and sustainable travel procedures. Our goal remains to fully utilise the country's scope of contribution in this sector and make it the number one global tourist destination.

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⁶<https://tourism.gov.in/wellness-tourism>

⁷<https://un.org/press/india-unep-2020-03-19-11-13-2020>

